

SPIRITUALITY IN THE CHURCH NURSERY:
TODDLER, FAMILY AND
CHURCH FAMILY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
DEDICATION.....	viii
ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
TABLES	x
ABBREVIATIONS	xi
EPIGRAPH.....	xii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE - THE MINISTRY FOCUS	4
The Blessing of Home	4
The Blessings of a Church.....	8
The Blessing of Children.....	11
The Blessing of a Church Nursery	16
A Blessing in Design	18
CHAPTER TWO - THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY PROJECT	22
CHAPTER THREE - THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	29
Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture	29
First Assumption: Children Have an Innate Spirituality	37

Second Assumption: Families Nurture a Child's Spirituality; The Child Nurtures the Adult's Spirituality.....	52
Third Assumption: The Church Family Supports Families in Nurturing and Blessing One Another.....	78
Conclusion.....	105
CHAPTER FOUR - HYPOTHESIS.....	107
CHAPTER FIVE FIELD EXPERIENCE.....	112
Prior to The Act of Ministry.....	113
The Six-Week Act of Ministry.....	118
Observations of The Act of Ministry.....	127
An Adult Class on Toddler Spirituality.....	132
Conclusion.....	141
CHAPTER SIX - REFLECTIONS, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	142
Reflections on the Six-Week Act of Ministry	143
Spirituality of Toddlers Adult Class.....	169
Summary.....	171
Conclusion.....	175
Looking to the Future	177
Closing Statement.....	179
APPENDIX A - DOCUMENTS FOR PROMOTION AND PERMISSION	182
APPENDIX B - COMPARISON OF TYPICAL NURSERY TO BBSN CLASS	187
APPENDIX C - TODDLER CLASS PARENT SURVEYS.....	189
APPENDIX D - DATA COLLECTION	192

APPENDIX E – TODDLER CLASS OUTLINE.....	199
APPENDIX F - OBSERVATIONS	203
APPENDIX G- SPIRITUALITY OF TODDLERS ADULT CLASS	213
APPENDIX H - EDUCATIONAL THEORIES WITH TODDLERS	218
APPENDIX I - SPIRITUALITY OF TODDLERS CLASS SURVEYS.....	221
APPENDIX J – BAPTISMAL RESPONSE	226
BIBLIOGRAPHY	228

ABSTRACT

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by

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This project implemented a Christian education model with elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture for a toddler's Sunday School class, ages eighteen to twenty-four months, and a parent's study on toddler's spirituality at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City. Qualitative research observed a toddlers' class; interviewed parents of young children and reflected on the author's journaling. Brain research, educational and developmental theories, biblical, historical and theological foundations supported the importance of intentional spiritual focus on the church nursery. Valuing the toddler's spirituality, acting on baptismal vows, by both the nuclear family and the church family, increased spiritual formation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Roses of gratitude to St. Luke's United Methodist Church for their support of children's ministries; to the professional and context associates who helped with clarity in developing the project; and to family and friends who gave attention to detail, insight and inspiration for this paper.

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the young children who lead us in continually discovering something new about the kingdom of God

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Jesus and Children Mural.....	14
Figure 2. Classroom Hallway.....	15
Figure 3. Nursery Mural.....	15
Figure 4. Toddler Class Room.....	113
Figure 5. Blessing.....	121
Figure 6. Sacred Space Box.....	134

TABLES

Table 1. Worship and Sunday School Average Attendance.....	9
Table 2. Children involved in Sunday School and other activities.....	12
Table 3. Children's Sunday School Attendance.....	13

ABBREVIATIONS

BBSN	Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture
ESFI	Enculturation, Socialization, Formation, Instruction
MI	Multiple Intelligences

We who teach children the faith learn what faith is from the children

Donald B. Rogers, *The Way of the Teacher*

INTRODUCTION

“Did you talk about Jesus?” the mother asked her twenty-two month old child. “Jesus,” “Jo-Jo” the child replied. The mom explained the difference between Jesus and Jo-Jo the toy clown. The theological dialogue is now open! What is the church nursery doing to engage toddler children, younger than two years of age, in nurturing their spirituality? The problem is infants and toddlers are not viewed as spiritual and, the church needs only to provide a safe environment and nothing to nurture spirituality. Church caregivers, more often than not, are biding their time while making a few dollars. Yes, there are those church nurseries with committed caregivers who love children and actually play and interact with the toddler. Very little thought has been given in regard to toddlers having anything to contribute to spirituality.

Many times the church nursery is not a priority, except in having a person to watch children while parents attend to the important things of worship, study and church meetings. In the research of this work there has been more evidence found that helps adults understand how young children learn. Toddlers are ready for the church to offer more to them. After all, it is the church’s call to nurture and grow disciples of faith! Why wait? It is time to begin with the church nursery!

Chapter one describes the author’s journey and the importance of family nurture and nurture from her church family. This chapter describes the best job in the world, the author’s context of ministry at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City.

This chapter informs the reader of her motivation for developing this project. The church nursery lovingly cares for very young children on Sunday mornings while parents attend worship and Sunday School. One of the tasks of the church nursery is to recognize and celebrate a toddler's spirituality. This project developed a Sunday School class model for toddlers eighteen months to twenty-four months in age. Parental spiritual nurture, partnered with a nurturing church family deepened the roots into the elements of Blessing Based Spirituality discussed throughout this work. BBSN, a model of spiritual formation, offered a variety of ways to connect with God and claim the goodness of the Creator.

The work and ministry of three key persons have influenced this project. The work of Jerome Berryman¹, theologian and Christian Educator who developed Godly Play; the work of Rev. Leanne Hadley in the development of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture in Colorado Springs, and the Chapel model developed by Jackie Nowak, The Blessing Center, in Xenia, Ohio. Reflected in this project is a compilation of their work which is aimed at toddlers in the church nursery. This model allows toddlers to connect with God and experience affirmation of their spirituality.

The second chapter offers a literary overview on children's spirituality. Biblical, historical, and theological resources lack development on the spirituality of toddlers. Therefore, the author refers to resources in the fields of Christian education, child development, and brain development to support this project as well.

The third chapter presents information from the literature outlined in chapter two. This research is based on the author's three assumptions. First, children have an innate spirituality or connect to God in ways beyond an adult's understanding; second, this

¹ Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play Workshop* (1987); Leanne Hadley, *The Holy Listening Method Training Course* (Colorado Springs, 2003); Jacqueline Nowak, *The Blessing Center* <http://www.blessingcenter.org> (accessed 17 January 2007).

innate spirituality can and is nurtured by families as they recognize, affirm and nurture that spirituality through rituals of prayer and holy listening; and third, the church family provides space and resources to guide families in the practices of nurturing spirituality.

Chapter four describes the methodology used to obtain information of fifteen toddlers observed in the nursery class and a parent class on toddler spirituality.

The fifth chapter provides a detailed description of the field experience in the classroom, observations from observers in the class and observations of parents. It also includes a classroom experience with parents of infants, toddlers, and preschool age children.

In chapter six, the author reflects upon the field experience biblically and theologically. She summarizes the discoveries, draws conclusions and suggests further research regarding the study.

This is a suggested model of ministry that offers another avenue for toddlers to connect with God rather than only childcare or babysitting in the church nursery. The author diligently tried not to reflect her bias but to reflect only her passion for young children. Ultimately this project will sensitize others to the God in toddlers and encourage the discovery of acknowledging and celebrating the toddlers' spirituality while in the church nursery.

CHAPTER ONE - THE MINISTRY FOCUS

The Blessing of Home

The author of this project received the blessing of growing in a home that provided Christian nurture. Childhood bedtime prayer rituals and Sunday morning rituals instilled spiritual values in this author. The importance of the love and care of a church family encouraged and supported this author through joyful and difficult days. These valuable relationships modeled a Christian lifestyle. Memories of these relationships last a lifetime. The author's faith journey described these key values and other values valid to a positive environment that genuinely honors the spirituality of children.

The author of this work grew up as an only child with older parents. The family did not attend church. Her dad worked seven days a week in the oil fields all across the state of Oklahoma. Her mother did not drive, but she gave her full attention to nurturing her child in Christian education. Her mother's educational tools included music, prayer, and the technology of television. Each Sunday morning, her mother's ritual began with turning on the black and white television set for the two of them to watch "Miss Jane" tell stories of Jesus. Her mother sang the great theology of "Jesus Loves Me," and every night she said a memorized prayer of "Now I lay me down to sleep" which comforted the child before bedtime.

At age eight she attended a children's mid-week Bible story class in a woman's home. This Bible story teacher taught from a tiny book with colored pages. The teacher opened the book to a page of red and told about the blood of Jesus. The teacher pointed to the black page and called it sin. Then she pointed to the white page and told the class "Jesus will wash us white as snow." The last page she showed the children was gold, and she explained it was the road to heaven. The child was frightened by what she heard and never returned to that class.

Twice this child attended a church service during her first eleven years and experienced fear! She went with a friend to a church revival and sat in a pew near the back of the small sanctuary. The preacher made the call for everyone who loved Jesus to come forward, and the friend whispered, "Let's go." Reluctantly, she went. An adult towered over her asking her questions. They took her into a room where others, who had come forward, were being questioned. A conversation about salvation ensued. She sat quietly, in the dimly lit room with a conversation beyond her comprehension, and she wanted to go home. The second time she attended church a curtain lifted to reveal a large glass tank of water. The pastor stood, in the tank, holding a child's nose and pulled her under the water! Fear went through her due to her own fear of water.

Her family moved to a new community when she entered the seventh grade. Her mother made a new commitment to attend Sunday School and church. During this time, her mom convinced her daughter that she was going to hell if she did not attend confirmation classes and join the church through baptism. She obeyed, not sure of what the process meant, except that this action comforted and pleased mom. Mom and dad presented her with her first Bible.

As a youth, she spent each night writing in her diary and reading her King James red-letter version of the Bible. She did not understand much of what she read, but something compelled her to read it each night. She loved learning about Jesus, and she wanted to follow him. She felt inadequate in her knowledge of the Bible and could recall only a few scriptures and biblical stories which her mother taught her. She learned about the value of her church family who accepted her with her lack of biblical knowledge, encouraged her to go to church camp, and affirmed her as she grew in faith. Throughout her teenage years her Sunday School teachers and adult youth leaders nurtured her in leadership, giving, sharing, and praying.

Fifteen or more years passed. The girl, now an adult woman, attended a workshop on biblical storytelling led by an Episcopalian priest, Jerome Berryman¹. He sat on the floor holding a beautiful gold box. “Parables are valuable,” he said. He peeked inside the box and pulled out a green felt circle and asked “I wonder” questions. Then he added pieces of brown felt, some oddly shaped black felt pieces and a blue felt oval. He carefully placed some sheep and what appeared as a biblical figure on the felt. He began the story, “Once there was one who said such amazing things and did such wonderful things that people followed him.” Immediately, this adult woman, found herself pulled into the story. The figure moved the sheep through the dark places and places of danger. The power of symbol brought awe and amazement to this young woman. She felt a sense of wonder as new insights touched her heart deeply. It would be this story that would sustain her through the most difficult times in her life ahead.

It was Monday after Easter when the young woman’s mom took ill. Her mom’s doctor said, “You have a malignant tumor on your brain.” Mother and daughter cried in

¹ Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play Workshop* (1987).

anguish. The daughter prayed for strength and church family members blessed her with their presence. It became more difficult for her to face the drive to the hospital each day. She thought she could not go to the hospital one more time, and then God gave her a vision. As she drove down the highway, a fluffy white cloud appeared near the top of the windshield. A pole ran through the middle of the cloud. Could it be God telling her to hold on? Could God be giving her a sign that God is with her to give her strength? She believed God was showing her the way through the dark places.

Years passed. This woman found more challenges in her journey through life. The toughest challenge came in August of 2001. She received a call from her doctor who gently said, "It is breast cancer." No one in her family had survived this dreaded disease. Fear overwhelmed her. She decided to journal about this cancer journey. She talked openly with God, through her journaling, and voiced impatience waiting on medical reports. She bargained and pleaded with God, "Please, let there be only one kind of cancer." Breath prayers eased the anxiety and her mantra became, "Breathe in God's spirit, breathe out anxiety."

It was through her journaling prayer time that she learned to ask her church family and friends to pray for her. They nurtured her through the cancer journey with encouragement, laughter, and hope. She remembered songs of faith that kept her strong. Once again, God's presence surrounded her in the dark places and brought her comfort.

It is important to relate to God's children with positive attitudes and give them tools to lessen their fears. Jesus loves through the nurturing gifts of family. The revelation of God's presence shines through the church family who models a relationship that showered God's blessings.

The Blessings of a Church

It all began around a white flag in 1889. The first Sunday after the Oklahoma land run a trumpet sounded and people rallied around the flag to praise God for the opportunities to come, to give thanks for abounding blessings and sang praises with “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and “Amazing Grace.” This pioneering congregation became the Methodist Episcopal Church South.²

One hundred and sixteen years later, in the twenty-first century, St. Luke’s United Methodist Church finds its home located near two major highways in the heart of Oklahoma City. This 98% Caucasian congregation moved to their third and present location in 1950 and built a beautiful and resourceful facility. Worship attendance exceeded an average of eleven-hundred each week. The 1957 sanctuary design, seated 1600 and the architecture symbolized God’s creation of the world. Amazing stained-glass windows depicted God’s story through symbol.

In 1960, Sunday School attendance averaged more than a 1,000. Church school on June 20, 1965, listed two Sunday School hours, with children’s attendance of six-hundred and two.³ The years of growth slowed once “white flight” moved people out of the neighborhoods to the suburbs. In the 1980’s, the congregation feared the rumor about their beloved church joining other dying downtown churches. In 1991, a young pastor, his wife and two small children received the appointment to St. Luke’s as the senior pastor. The 1992 Journal of The Oklahoma Annual Conference showed the facts:

² *St. Luke’s United Methodist Church: Witness to a Loving God* (Oklahoma City: St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, 1989), 3.

³ *The Orbiter* (Oklahoma City: St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, 1965).

average worship attendance for 1991 – 804; average total Sunday School attendance – 610.⁴ The trend continued for another two years and bottomed out at 708 before making a come back. The congregation longed for full classrooms and the experiences of a great church that had been St. Luke's reputation.

From 1991 to present, the pastor led the church toward reclaiming and celebrating its rich heritage. The vision energized the congregation as they renovated its facility for relevant ministries, addressing the needs of families. Parking with handicap accessibility, three new playgrounds for the child-development center, a new elevator, and a columbarium brought renewal. Each year new members joined and each year attendance climbed.⁵ See Table 1

Table 1. Worship and Sunday School Average Attendance

year	Worship average	Sunday School average
2000	962	515
2001	1066	579
2002	1097	602
2003	1114	655
2004	1127	674
2005	1098	605

This faithful congregation frequently took risks reaching out to others in creative ways as noted in St. Luke's *Witness to a Loving God*.⁶ The 1951 call to help others, around the world facing poverty and hunger, came out of this congregation with an

⁴ *Oklahoma Annual Conference Journal* (Oklahoma City: 1992).

⁵ *Pastor's Report to Charge Conference* (Oklahoma City: 2005).

⁶ *Witness to a Loving God*, 38.

organization to address these issues, World Neighbors. The first adult continuing education class began in 1962, bringing in hundreds from the community, every Friday, for an array of classes that included basket weaving, computer basics, history of the Christian Church, Women in the Bible, and many more classes.⁷ The creation of a child development center opened in 1969 with fifty-three children to serve the needs of working parents.⁸ A 1991 mission trip to Russia created an ongoing relationship with the Russia community of faith and resulted in the birth and support of two United Methodist churches.

The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building, in 1995, literally shook the downtown area. St. Luke's opened its doors to the Red Cross and provided housing and food to families waiting for news about their loved ones, care was provided to those whose apartments were damaged, and around the clock care to those working day and night in the rescue and recovery efforts.

In 1999, the congregation took a pioneering step in adding a contemporary worship service. Wednesday evening programs offered a fresh array of classes for all ages. Two "Habitat for Humanity" homes were built, an after-school session for middle school urban youth established, and a spiritual direction program for adults, "HeartPaths," reached into the community. Each of these programs demonstrated the importance of building relationships that make a difference in the world.

Key leaders in the church, along with the staff, created the church mission statement. The newly developed 2005 mission of the St. Luke's family of faith became

⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁸ Ibid., 137.

to share God's love and give hope to the world. The goals developed to live the mission were three-fold: to share Christ, grow in faith and serve the community.

Downtown Oklahoma City made a comeback after the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building. The last ten years brought significant growth in downtown Oklahoma City with the building of new apartments for young professionals, the establishment of several new hotels and other businesses, the addition of cultural sites, plus the creation of a beautiful mile-long canal.

The Blessing of Children

St. Luke's Staff-pastor relations committee desired to make children a priority and hired their first ordained children's ministries professional in 1999. After the creation of the added contemporary worship service, a second Sunday School hour created space for additional classes. Most of the large classrooms had the look of the 1950's with high ceilings, dim lighting, few working electrical outlets, old sinks and toilets. The building's poor condition took away from inviting families into the church.

The senior pastor discovered a creative Sunday School program called Rotation Sunday School. He had the children's minister research the possibility of developing the program for St. Luke's. As a result, in 2001, a major change took place in the Sunday School for elementary children. After extensive research, the children's ministry team developed a new vision, mission statement and goals toward a new way of experiencing Sunday School. The vision created stated, "From generation to generation stories of faith will be experienced, owned and remembered, because the children and adults will

encounter God through St. Luke's Church School. Children and adults will develop a lasting relationship arising out of their church school experience."

The new mission statement for children's for the Great Adventure Sunday School became: Passing on God's story making it memorable, meaningful and fun! The strategy for obtaining the goal would be in the design of outstanding creative rooms that invite children to experience their faith through multi-dimensional learning environments. Volunteers would have the opportunity to share their gifts and talents to help the stories of faith come alive for everyone. Curriculum based on Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, under girded the rotation Sunday School model, a model in which children experienced the story in a variety of ways other than verbal.

Unanimously the church agreed to move from traditional Sunday School to rotational Sunday School and nine rooms for grades first through sixth became a reality. Children's attendance experienced a tremendous growth in that first year of transition. The report from Oklahoma Conference Journals 2001-2005⁹ showed figures of children birth through grade six for the previous year involved in Church School and all children's related programs. See Table 2

Table 2. Children Involved in Sunday School and Other Activities

Year	Elementary grades 1-6	Young children birth to Kindergarten
2000	25	49
2001	65 Great Adventure begins	52
2002	68	58
2003	66	62
	Elementary Grades K-5	Young children birth to age 5
2004	73	55

⁹ *Oklahoma Annual Conference Journal: The United Methodist Church* (Oklahoma City: 2001-2005).

St. Luke's Sunday School attendance records noted the following for the 9:40 A.M. (the first Sunday School hour only) over a period from January to mid October. 2004 indicated a change in moving sixth grade out of the children's department, to begin a middle school program, and the addition of the Kindergarten class into "The Great Adventure," St. Luke's rotation Sunday School. See Table 3

Table 3. Children's Sunday School Attendance

year	Children's Sunday School attendance
2000	172
2001	179 The Great Adventure opened fall '01
2002	231
2003	317
2004	374
2005	381

The next step looked into the church database for the number of young children at St. Luke's. Five zip codes were chosen based on the largest number of church members in those areas. The discovery showed one hundred and eleven children lived within minutes of this regional church. An exciting future for St. Luke's!

The completed renovation of the elementary Sunday School motivated members to do something different for the preschool and infant areas. The challenge would be working with a full time child development center and working out territorial issues.

The weekday ministry, The Children's Center, cares for children five days a week, 6:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. All the preschool and infant rooms experienced heavy use between the Children's Center and Sunday School. The rooms had the day care look of clutter, odors, children's names laminated to cubbies, tables, and chairs, open shelving,

and very little storage space for Sunday School teachers. Nothing in the classrooms alluded to a religious environment. Children attended Sunday School in day care rooms.

The author heeded God's call to advocate for the youngest children. The goal would be to develop a church nursery that nurtured families with young children. This included a model for the best ways to safely share space; provide classroom space conducive for young children to explore their spirituality; and create a team, which included the young child's parents, the paid church care staff and the volunteer teachers, who would listen to and acknowledge the spirituality of the very young child. Over a two-year span, a design team of church volunteers and day care staff, met and designed classroom space that would convert from Day Care to Sunday School around the theme "I went walking with Jesus." This theme invited families with children into creative, comfortable and safe spaces.



Fig. 1. Jesus and Children Mural (Courtesy of St. Luke's United Methodist Church)

Volunteer artists, Bill Peterson and MaryAnn Wall created the sculpture of St. Luke's children. "We went walking with Jesus . . ." Pictures of children from families at St. Luke's were used in the creation of this mural.

The infant-toddler rooms depicted homes. Four rooms, two on each side of the hallway, created the effect of a neighborhood. Fronts of houses with windows faced the hall.



Fig. 2. Classroom hallway (Photo by author)

The mural that welcomed stated, "I went walking with Jesus, and what did I see? I saw God's hands holding me." Volunteer artists, Ben Hall and Matt Schein, created the softly painted nursery entrance mural.



Fig. 3. Nursery Mural (Courtesy of St. Luke's United Methodist Church)

The idea was to create a sacred space that appeared like home rather than an institutional day care environment or a forgotten church nursery. This new area of Christian education for young children would be called “The Wee Adventure.” Soon the Wee Adventure curriculum team began and prepared curriculum for toddlers through preschool age children.

The Blessing of a Church Nursery

The overlooked and neglected church nursery often became a time for babysitting rather than an opportunity for intentional spiritual nurture. What does the church offer, during that “babysitting” time, to help new parents catch a vision of acknowledging and shaping the faith of their dear little ones? What motivated a congregation to share in the ministry of the church nursery? It was important to pay attention to the physical, social, and psychological development of infants and toddlers. It was also important to pay attention to the child’s development and innate spirituality.

The number of new young families continued to grow at St. Luke’s. The author’s journey of faith and her context of ministry evolved into the dream of a church nursery where children grew in a faith-filled environment that blessed children rather than an environment that created fear. The author’s childhood experience revealed the priority of a nurturing family and church family. It also showed the role ritual played in building a foundation of faith. This act of ministry offered resources for parents to start this journey of not only guiding, but also listening to their children and walking along side them in the journey of faith.

The goal for the toddler class connected with the life experience of the author. St. Luke's would offer an environment where a toddler heard "Jesus loves me," experienced the nurture and assurance of God's love and where families received resources to nurture their child's innate spirituality.

This context of ministry resonated throughout the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference as the church on the cutting edge of ministry. St. Luke's modeled children as a priority. Therefore, it was important to take seriously the research of this paper and incorporate the findings into the life of the church.

A BBSN environment includes a place for adults and children to grow, learn, and practice the concepts of BBSN. St. Luke's would offer a place for toddlers to experience religious language through stories, play and music. Toddlers play with toys specifically symbolic to the Christian faith and plus common toys used spiritually that enriches the toddler's religious language. The author refers to these as spiritual toys which help children relate to God through play. Jesus used common items to teach the faith through parables; therefore, toys may provide a spiritual purpose. This is a place for toddlers to engage in exploring their spiritual journeys through play. Adults know the value of God's gift of children and can learn about their own faith journey by listening to the young child's expressions of faith.

A training in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture with a core group of parents and young children, caregivers and other church family members assisted with resources in knowing more about the development of the child's spirit.

Benefits to the child and the child's family included components of blessing, prayer and holy listening that stay with the family for a lifetime. Rituals that enhanced

faith development and the sharing of faith stories which gave strength and hope to God's people in the dark moments of life. Benefits to the church included the gift of hospitality which invited more families with young children to be a part of the St. Luke's family of faith and the church benefited from what a child taught about God.

Curriculum or resources that engaged the child's spiritual brain with ritual, positive experiences, prayer, and holy listening may carry over into the home life as the family grows spirituality with their child. The family received assurance, at their child's baptism, that their family of faith would nurture and support them in their journey.

Discovering what an eighteen to twenty-four month old child could teach an adult about God and God's kingdom needed further study. The possibilities of creating a model for a toddler's Sunday School class, would help families listen to their child and to each other. It would give families insight in the discovery and celebration of God's blessings. St. Luke's children's ministry team desired to share, grow and serve our youngest members in God's family.

A Blessing in Design

Think about the dream for the best Christian Education a church could offer. That was the call God placed on Christian Educators. Faithful and dedicated leadership created excitement and united followers into a team of creativity. One very important leadership characteristic included casting a vision for Christian education. A vision which created inviting spaces for nurturing faith, offering curriculum that feeds the brain and shapes the soul, and people committed to sharing God's love. These three critical elements,

presented age-appropriately, provided a greater potential towards a desire for growing and learning about God. St. Luke's Church brought this dream to reality.

St. Luke's infant and preschool rooms were quite spacious. It was not uncommon to walk into a space fifteen feet by fifteen feet with ten-foot high ceilings. The walls were a bold color of blue with chipping paint and limited electrical outlets that might or might not work. The fifty-year-old dimly lit classrooms contained the original lighting. The availability of bathrooms, with child-size sinks and toilets, were limited. The deterioration of the floor tiles made it next to impossible to thoroughly clean. It was quite an embarrassment to show these rooms to the new families looking for a church home. These rooms did not offer the creative environment that welcomed children into a learning atmosphere. "Children need welcome to grow in faith."¹⁰

The first visible signs of hospitality for these rooms were clutter. Day care tables, chairs, open shelving for toys, and curriculum and supplies offered no ownership for Sunday School. Labeled everywhere were names of children who attended the childcare center. Not a single representation of what happened on Sunday at church was visible. The built-in storage was too high for teachers to use easily. Very large, grey, open topped trash cans added to the unsightly appearance of the rooms.

The author wrestled with what to do to enhance the Sunday School rooms as well as the best ways to form a loving baby-sitting environment that shaped young disciples. The author, a professional Christian educator, learned about creating inviting classrooms. The author encouraged people to stand in the doorway of the classroom and talk about the first thing they saw. Did they see clutter or an age appropriate worship center? What

¹⁰ Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 133.

invited children into the classroom? Were pictures at the child's eye-level? The big question surfaced: Can the design of a room draw children into the fun of learning about God?

The book, *Inside the Magic Kingdom—Seven Keys to Disney's Success*, influenced this author's work of leading the church to develop a strong Christian education program for children. The chapter, "Paying attention to detail"¹¹ addressed the necessity of paying attention to even the smallest detail. Parents of young children looked for the best cared for spaces to leave their children. It would take a team to own the dream of paying close attention to the details needed in creating spaces appropriate for young children to grow in faith.

A carefully selected team of creative people, who loved children and had some understanding of child development, plus creative leaders from the Children's Center staff began the journey of putting together a vision of shared space for Sunday School and day care usage.

The project of a BBSN model of ministry in the church nursery would soon be underway. The author's experience of a nurturing home environment gave a vision for a church nursery that gave a home environment. It was time to take away institutional beige walls, dim lighting, and old fixtures. Once the physical environment was completed, then a new model for a toddler Sunday School class needed to be in place to complement the renovated room. A Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture model for the church nursery was about to emerge!

¹¹ Tom Connn, *Inside the Magic Kingdom* (Atlanta: Bard Press, 1996), 28.

The next chapter lists the major scholars in areas of theology, developmental theories, brain research, and Christian education which led to the development of this act of ministry to create a BBSN toddler Sunday School class.

CHAPTER TWO - THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY PROJECT

This overview of literature offered foundational research to the development of a Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture model in the church nursery. The journey began with the author's own experience of church nursery twenty-eight years ago and with the church nurseries of the twenty-first century. Now the research began.

A theologian from this century, David Jensen, author of *Graced Vulnerability*, noted Thomas Aquinas' claim that a child was not capable of understanding spirituality, a view which fit with others in that time period. Many considered the age of seven a time when children began their understanding. Jensen moved on to Howard Bushnell's promotion of play and the importance of play in nurturing children.¹ The authors of *Children Matter*, gave a brief review of other voices in history who agreed with Aquinas, which included Augustine and John Locke, and the supportive voices of childhood which included John Comenius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Wesley.²

Christian Educator John Westerhoff III, in his book *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*, gave a very helpful synopsis of writings throughout history. He spoke to the role of the parent nurturing the faith of a child. He began with St. John Chrysostom

¹ David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005).

² May, *Children Matter*.

and carried through to George Albert Coe.³ The voice of Augustine's doctrine of original sin impacted many not only in his time but still today. This doctrine has had negative ripples when applied to spirituality. Theologian, Matthew Fox, in his book, *Original Blessing*, offered a new idea of living in an understanding of original blessing which was the premise of this project.⁴ Jerome Berryman, a theologian and Christian educator focused his work on the use of metaphor and symbol and how children find their story in God's story. He described in detail the work of his model, *Godly Play*, in his handbook called *Teaching Godly Play: The Sunday Morning handbook*.⁵ This author has also employed this method with great success.

David Jensen's voice was heard, again, as he shared theologically the value of a very young child as "partners with God"⁶ and participants in the covenants. He also spoke of the church's role as an extension to the care and advocacy of children. Jürgen Moltmann valued spirituality and focused on the doctrine of hope in his book *In the End-The Beginning*.⁷ Marcus Borg explored life-giving practices of prayer, worship, and sabbath found in his book *The Heart of Christianity*. He focused on how living out the love of God gave Christian identity.⁸ Joyce Mercer's writing, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*,

³ John W. Westerhoff III, *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, Inc., 1980).

⁴ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Sante Fe: Bear & Company, 1983).

⁵ Jerome Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play* (Abingdon Press, 1995).

⁶ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, xiii.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *In The End-Beginning: The Life of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

⁸ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering A Life Of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003).

shared her wisdom and practical theology regarding parenting as a gift from God.⁹ *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, from 1964, gave the church the appropriate response regarding the sacrament of infant baptism.¹⁰ Additional liturgical responses are cited from the 1992 Book of Worship.¹¹

Hebrew scholar Walter Brueggemann pointed to trust as foundational to faith formation and suggested how the faith community can nurture a child. Various Old Testament stories were used to describe blessings of children; and New Testament stories in which Jesus valued children and demonstrated to those around him their importance to the kingdom. Another Biblical understanding of the word children referred to adults as God's children. The importance of ritual and symbol used by the people of Israel came through the Old and New Testaments.

Spiritual formation was another component important to the work of this project. Tilden Edwards provided insight from his book *Spiritual Director Spiritual Companion: Guide to Tending The Soul*;¹² and Margaret Guenther's focus on holy listening and attentiveness to God in her writing on Holy Listening: *The Art of Spiritual Direction*.¹³ Trevor Hudson's book, *Signposts to Spirituality*, spoke to the value of sacred spaces.¹⁴

⁹ Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press).

¹⁰ *The Book of Worship for Church and Home* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1965).

¹¹ *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992).

¹² Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Director Spiritual Companion: Guide to Tending The Soul* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

¹³ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1992).

¹⁴ Trevor Hudson, *Signposts to Spirituality*,

A long list of experts in Christian Education expounded on nurture, ritual, repetition, symbol, sacred space, environment and hospitality. Maria Montessorri and Sofia Cavalletti¹⁵ lead in models very similar to BBSN. Donald Ratcliff and colleagues wrote multiple articles related to Christian education and children in his book *Handbook of Children's Religious Education*¹⁶. Another educator, Iris V. Cully, compared several developmental theories in her book *Christian Child Development*.¹⁷ Dr. Catherine Stonehouse in her work entitled *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*,¹⁸ Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Jerome Berryman are other outstanding educators cited in this paper. Kris Haig contributed a chart for what to expect developmentally from young children.¹⁹ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain reflected on the topic of *What Makes Faith Mature*²⁰ which was one goal toward the raising of holy children and the acknowledgment of a child's innate spirituality. This author has been blessed to be in the presence of Dr. Don Rogers whose contributions in Christian education have influenced her,²¹ and his mentoring through this project has been tremendous.

Theorists have given a solid foundation of how children have been viewed developmentally. James Fowler's intensive work *Stages of Faith* attempted to label each faith

¹⁵ Sofia Cavaletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: The Description of an Experience with Children from Ages Three to Six*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter & Julie M. Coulter (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

¹⁶ Donald E. Ratcliff, ed., *Handbook of Children's Religious Education* (Birmingham Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Iris V. Cully, *Christian Child Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

¹⁸ Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

¹⁹ Kris Haig, Hungry Hearts, Spring 2004, Volume XIII, Number 1, *A Developmental Perspective on Spiritual Practices*, (Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church).

²⁰ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *What Makes Faith Mature* <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=771> (accessed 3 July 2007)

²¹ Donald B. Rogers, "ESFI" (Trotwood Ohio:United Theological Seminary, 2005).

developmental Stage.²² His valuable work laid a foundation for this research, but does not focus on development under the age of three. The Multiple Intelligence theory developed by Howard Gardner argued for ways people learn other than through verbal and math skills.²³

The recent work of Scottie May Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse and Linda Cannell in their book, *Children Matter*, gave this author three major concepts which impacted her project. These concepts included the history of Sunday School, the affirmation of celebrating the child's place in the church, family and community, plus Thomas Groome's challenge to view students as "persons for relationship."²⁴

Other literary resources included the brain research of Phyllis Porter, *Early Brain Development*, and how this research affected ways to nurture.²⁵ Eric Jensen's *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* pointed out how language and intelligence was formed in young children.²⁶ Karen DeBord's research entitled *Brain Development*²⁷ and *Infant Brain Development*²⁸ was valuable in this process. Christian educator, Barbara Bruce, has also

²² James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

²³ Harvey F. Silver, Richard W. Strong, Matthew J. Perini, *So Each May Learn: Integrating Learning Styles and Multiple Intelligences* (Alexandria, VA.: ASCD, 2000), 6-7.

²⁴ Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 144.

²⁵ Phyllis Porter, *Early Brain Development* <http://www.educarer.com/brain.htm> (accessed 24 February 2006).

²⁶ Eric Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998.)

²⁷ Karen DeBord, *Brain Development* http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/human/pubs/brain_nc.html (accessed 24 February 2006).

²⁸ DeBord, *Infant Brain Development* <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fs/human/braindev.html> (accessed 24 February 2006).

researched brain development related to environment, curriculum and the teacher in *Our Spiritual Brain: Integrating Brain Research and Faith Development*.²⁹

Little research was found on children's spirituality under the age of two. The only research found that focused on very young children was the work of Karen Yust. Her work, *Toddler Spiritual Formation and the Faith Community*, explored a toddler's development including spiritual development. She also suggested how the role of family and the faith community can best nurture the toddler.³⁰

Only a few models existed for any type of toddler ministry. This author consulted a public school curriculum for preschool children entitled *The Complete Daily Curriculum for Early Childhood*.³¹ Most church nurseries use a loving approach of watching the children in their care. The United Methodist Church has not developed its own toddler curriculum but joined with other churches in an ecumenical effort to provide curriculum entitled *Toddlers and Twos*.³² This one-year curriculum, written for a very broad age span of twelve months to thirty-six months contained activities and stories more appropriate for the older children. *Radiant Baby*, from Gospel Publishing, focused a curriculum for newborns to eighteen months and then skipped to age two for the next curriculum.³³ Palma Smiley's early childhood curriculum had toddler curriculum called *To Toddlers With Love*. Again, this

²⁹ Barbara Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain: Integrating Brain Research and Faith Development* (Nashville: Abingdon press, 2002).

³⁰ Karen Marie Yust, "Toddler Spiritual Formation and the Faith Community," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (August 2003).

³¹ Pam Schiller and Pat Phipps, *The Complete Daily Curriculum for Early Childhood* (Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, Inc., 2002).

³² *Toddlers & Twos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

³³ *Radiant Baby* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007).

curriculum was broad as it focused on children eighteen months to three and half years.³⁴

There was definitely a need for a solid curriculum for eighteen to twenty-four months.

The sharing between peers was invaluable in the BBSN group at United Theological Seminary, in Dayton, Ohio. This author was nurtured in her journey of research, study, and spiritual growth. The following chapter projects three assumptions supported by this comprehensive listing of literature.

³⁴ Palma Smiley, *To Toddlers With Love* <http://www.earlychildhood-curr.com/crrpage.html> (accessed 3 July 2007).

CHAPTER THREE - THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture

It has a name! A joyful discovery was made by this author after attending a certification class on Children's Spirituality in Colorado Springs in 2004. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (BBSN) was what the leader of the class kept saying. That leader, Rev. Leanne Hadley, a United Methodist elder and developer of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture,¹ influenced this author's journey of faith. The practices stressed God's presence already within the child.

This author pushed for excellence throughout her children's ministry career but with timidity. Timid because of attitudes towards children's ministries such as: low priority given to children's ministries, attitudes of entertaining children verses growing children, and the image that those leading children's ministries were not "real" ministers. This author renewed her enthusiasm after attending the certification class, and claimed, with a strong advocacy, the great value and importance children's ministries has on the church and family. This led to the research of focusing on very young children, their families and the faith community.

¹ Leanne Hadley, *The Holy Listening Method Training Course* (Colorado Springs, 2003).

The author determined three assumptions for this act of ministry which included:

1. Children have an innate spirituality. Children's spirituality connects to God in ways beyond an adult's understanding. Children model a way of life in God's kingdom.
2. Families nurture a child's innate spirituality. Families recognize, affirm and nurture a child's spirituality towards increasing wholeness, especially through prayer and holy listening.
3. The church family, through its education and worship life, supports the nurturing ministry of families by offering a safe and enriching space appropriate for families to learn and grow together. It also provides ideas, resources and guidance in the practices of nurturing in a pattern that announces and channels the blessing of God.

These three inclusive circles recognize and nurture the children of God from the very beginning. Support for these assumptions comes through historical, theological, and biblical research, plus research in education, developmental theories and brain research.

This author defined Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture as a model for teaching children, leading adult small groups, or guiding persons one on one to discover how God's presence emphasized goodness and leads one to acts of love. Dissecting the phrase Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture was the method chosen to gain a deeper understanding of this concept. It was through the author's experience of teaching adult Sunday School classes that she set before them a challenge to name what each word might mean. It was then that the definition became clearer. However, to truly discover the defining moments one must "come and see" or "come and experience" Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture with children. That was when more was revealed.

Blessing—Recognizing and Claiming God’s Goodness

The relational act of blessing came from God through the agent of a person. A BBSN ministry would connect God’s people through relationships with one another and with God. This author experienced the mystery of the living Christ as faces of children and adults glowed each time they received a blessing with oil. The giver of the blessing experienced awe and wonder and received a blessing in return.

Matthew Fox stated: “. . . the Hebrew word for blessing, *berakah*, is closely related to the word for create, *bara* (in its noun form, *beriyah*). This suggests that a creation is necessarily a blessing, is wrapped up as a blessing. . . . The word for covenant, *beriyth*, is also directly related to the words for ‘create’ and for ‘blessing’. A covenant is a blessing agreement, a promise to bless and to return blessing for blessing.”² He also said, “Blessing involves relationship: one does not bless without investing something of oneself into the receiver of one’s blessing. And one does not receive blessing oblivious of its gracious giver.”³ When adults allow the gift of children to bless them the unconditional love of God was more able to flourish in their life. When paying attention to God’s presence in the relationship both adult and child received the blessing.

A witness to Fox’s statement comes from an adult leader of children. A Wednesday evening program, Holy Club, brought children in closer relationship with the spirit’s leading through scripture, prayer and blessing. It was the first session and the first time to experience blessing. The teacher of the fifth graders was hesitant to try a blessing at the close of the class time, because of a large number of boys participating in the class.

² Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Sante Fe: Bear & Company, 1983), 46.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

She wondered, “What would a fifth grade boy think of blessing?” However, the teacher tried it. She took out the healing balm and explained that she would make a sign of the cross on their forehead. She went to each student, called them by name, and said, “May God bless you till we meet again.” Later that evening, she stated with surprise, joy and amazement, “The boys did not mind at all. They brushed their hair off their forehead to receive the sign of the cross. Each time a smile came across their face.” This teacher invested herself in a relationship with God and her students and delighted in the goodness of God’s presence. The experience of blessing produced glowing faces and a sense of peace shared by all.

Based—Foundation Which Gives Structure and Support

Dr. Catherine Stonehouse, professional Christian educator commented, “Notice that children do not imitate just anyone. . . . We have the wonderful opportunity of influencing the children who love us and who sense a link with us; they watch and imitate the way we live.”⁴ Will God’s people choose to model rituals that lead children closer to God? What a tremendous responsibility and a tremendous gift.

What type of structure might demonstrate blessing? Perhaps a child’s simple expression of gratefulness as they recognize and give thanks to God for the tiny bug on the hiking trail or thanks for the bread, meat, lettuce, pickle and mustard on a sandwich. The ritual of tucking a child into bed, reading a bedtime story, a prayer of thanks for mommy and daddy and a kiss goodnight portrays blessing. Another was the ritual of

⁴ Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 114.

eating breakfast, brushing teeth and getting dressed for the day. These became routines that gave comfort and assurance, structure and support. When adults modeled to children the practice of spirituality, prayer, holy listening, meditation and study of God's word, it became the foundation from which they live, a ritual for life.

Dr. Stonehouse spoke of the importance of rituals because they gave a base from which one operates. "Rituals aid in the process of forming the memories that bring comfort and pleasure."⁵ She noted that as parents cared for their baby they developed a repeated pattern of when the baby eats, sleeps and needs a diaper changed. She also stated, "Babies remember the repeated pattern and find comfort in knowing what to expect."⁶

Even though children may not understand the meaning of ritual, children experience ritual. Barbara Bruce, a United Methodist Christian educator, studied and researched the brain in relationship to spirituality. She stated, "All the words a child hears, even though the words are not comprehended, establish neural connections that can be activated later."⁷ Stonehouse claimed, "Young children will not be able to explain the meaning of the ritual, but experiencing it may provide important pieces to be incorporated into their images of God and faith."⁸ The author's granddaughter, Sarah, age four and half and grandson Nathan, age seven and half demonstrated this in their conversation. Nana took the blessing stick and started to draw a cross on the back of

⁵ Ibid., 152.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Barbara Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain: Integrating Brain Research and Faith Development* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 68.

⁸ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 156.

Sarah's little hand. Sarah, instead, asked that she draw God. Nathan giggled and exclaimed, "Oh, God is much bigger than that!" These children were processing and incorporating images of God into their faith.

Spiritual—Acknowledging God's Presence and Activity

Janet Vennard described spirituality as one who relates to God. Therefore, a spiritual life relates everything to God, a spiritual practice deepens that relationship, and a spiritual retreat is a time away with God for the purpose of growing the relationship with God. Vennard continued her description saying that a spiritual reading guides in creating a deeper relationship with God and a spiritual person helps one see how to relate to God.⁹ Vennard says, "Spirituality is about growing, weaving, deepening, strengthening, and embracing fully our relationship to God. And prayer is at the heart of that relationship."¹⁰ "Through the centuries, children's experience of the spiritual was most often negated. Only adults have been thought of as capable of spirituality. Most early scholars considered the age of seven when a child was ready for engaging in the spiritual. Karen Yust, professor at the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana, shared in her article on *Toddler Spiritual Formation and the Faith Community*: "Activating spiritual awareness requires that toddlers learn some mode of religious expression for their spiritual experiences. Adults who wish to encourage religious reflection must also assume that toddlers are capable of understanding religious concepts and practices on their own developmental level and that their understandings, although different from

⁹ Jane E. Vennard, *Praying with Body and Soul – A Way to Intimacy with God*. (Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998), 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

those of adults, are valuable.”¹¹ This belief in a child’s spirituality nurtures rather than negates whether or not children are capable of spirituality.

Nurture—Care for and Feed

Often, ministries for the very young child consisted of childcare or baby sitting while the adult took time for spiritual growth and serving God. This childcare time, hopefully, included adults who loved God and loved infants and toddlers. The concept of trust formed at this time. Erik Erickson, psychologist, developed his understanding for nurturing children through the words trust, faith and identity. He described the stage of development for an infant’s first year as Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust and that what the child learned depended on the quality of the relationships with the nurturer.¹² Trusting that loved ones will return and that the childcare provider will tend to the little one’s needs will then later transfer that trust to God. Karen Yust says the first stage Erickson puts forth was also important for Walter Brueggemann, a Hebrew scripture scholar. “He reminds us that trust born of the experience that one’s needs will be met consistently and lovingly is foundational to faith formation.”¹³ Fox clearly understood the meaning of self-trust and other-trust when he quoted Goethe, “If you treat a person as she appears to be, you make her worse than she is. But if you treat a person as if she already were what she

¹¹ Karen Marie Yust, “Toddler Spiritual Formation and the Faith Community,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, Vol. I, No. 2, (August 2003): 140.

¹² Iris V. Cully, *Christian Child Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 2-3.

¹³ Yust, *Toddlers Spiritual Formation*, 134.

potentially could be, you make her what she should be.”¹⁴ If young children are treated as if they already have spirituality their spiritual formation will continue to grow.

More than twenty years ago, Walter Brueggemann wrote *Belong and Growing in the Christian Community*. It was written specifically for parents of infants and toddlers. He wrote, “Our nurturing task is to find ways of linking the big picture of [the church’s] redemptive history with the immediate experiences of the child’s daily life. Our hope is that the child will—over time—affirm that this is my story about me, and it is our story about us (Brueggemann, 1979, p. 31).”¹⁵

Brueggemann proposed five assumptions which parents and the faith community needed to provide in nurturing children. These included:

1. Sharing the spiritual story of love and redemption through compassionate care.
2. Tell the story of their spiritual tradition in connection with stories that make up their daily lives.
3. Celebrate stories of faith and personal spiritual stories through special holidays and in acts of charity and compassion.
4. Give opportunities for children to share spiritual stories with others and with God.
5. Offer ways children’s words and actions contribute to a more just and compassionate society.¹⁶

¹⁴ Fox, *Original Blessing*, 84.

¹⁵ Yust, *Toddlers Spiritual Formation*, 133.

¹⁶ Karen Marie Yust, *Real Kids Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 43.

First Assumption: Children Have an Innate Spirituality

History

Here is a brief look at persons who have had a significant voice throughout history in regard to children and their innate spirituality follows. The fourth-century voice, of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354-430 CE) focused on original sin. The thought was that since children were born into sin they should be baptized. The authors of *Children Matter* quoted Martha Stortz, “it would be cruel to exclude infants from baptism; they too needed access to baptism for the forgiveness of sin.”¹⁷ Perhaps Augustine’s view came out of fear rather than a sense of goodness and blessing. Children needed baptism to save them since they were not considered at an age of understanding.

The authors of *Children Matter* quoted from Nicolas Orme’s book, *Medieval Children*, “Concern for the eternal safety of young children continued in the medieval era. . . . Since clergy were not always present when a baby was deathly ill, laypeople were given instruction so that in an emergency they could perform a baptism.”¹⁸ The concern for a child’s spirituality hinged on the after-life consequences. The denial of children’s spirituality continued on with John Locke (1632-1704). Locke, an English philosopher, “. . . rejected the theological idea of the innate depravity or the innate goodness of the person. He proposed that a child is born as a *tabula rasa* or blank slate on

¹⁷ May, *Children Matter*, 93, Quoting Martha Ellen Stortz, “Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?: Augustine on Childhood,” *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 91.

¹⁸ Ibid., 95.

which the experiences of life . . . will write the life story.”¹⁹ A blank slate has nothing on it. There was no evidence of a writer. However, this author would argue that God’s presence within the child writes the journey. Therefore, the slate was full. There are those unable to read the writing on the slate of such young children.

John Comenius (1592-1670), a Moravian bishop and Christian education theorist believed holistic education began at infancy.²⁰ The way a young child learns comes through their play and exploration. When adults surround a child with an attitude of spirituality and blessing, the young child’s play becomes spiritual play. Let those who have ears listen to a child and hear God’s message. Let those who have eyes to see God’s goodness as a child, receive the kingdom of heaven.

Finally we meet Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). His courageous new voice debated Locke and brought another perspective which reshaped the view on the nature of childhood.²¹ He focused on the innate goodness of children. “. . . human beings are not born in a state of depravity but are contaminated as a result of living in a morally corrupt society.”²² In Rousseau’s 1762 novel, entitled *Emile*, he pioneered the idea that children learn when they are ready without such stern parental discipline. His view of the child, “Everything is good as it leave the hands of the Author of Things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.”²³

¹⁹ Ibid., 100.

²⁰ Ibid., 98-99.

²¹ Ibid., 100.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

“Wesley believed that God extends grace before a person calls for God’s help and that this grace is at work in the heart of every person.”²⁴ This was another concept that pointed to the innate spirituality of a child. God works and lives in all people whether voiced or not. Horace Bushnell, a nineteenth century American clergy, countered against salvation techniques for children. These techniques were typical for the revivalistic period which brought others into relationship with God.²⁵ This salvation technique devalued a child’s spirituality. “His text *Christian Nurture*, published in 1847, challenged the notion that children exist outside of God’s grace until their spiritual capacity has reached maturity.”²⁶ Children exhibited the kingdom, yet there were theologians, at this time, who proclaimed a particular age which allowed the availability of God’s grace to children, but “Bushnell suggested that a child could be raised in such a way as to ‘grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise’.”²⁷

F. G. Hibbard, wrote in 1864, in his book, *The Religion of Childhood*, “. . . all children are in a state of favor with God, who graciously imparts to them a genuine spiritual quickening.”²⁸ Another piece of evidence is that children have an innate awareness of God’s goodness and an innate spirituality nurtured by God. Karl Rahner, twentieth century Roman Catholic theologian wrote, *Ideas for a Theology of Children*. Rahner’s positive view valued childhood “. . . as having integrity and worth—and faith—

²⁴ Ibid., 151.

²⁵ Ibid., 105.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 105, quoting Burgess, “Models of Religious Education,” 82.

²⁸ Wade Crawford Barclay, *Part Two The Methodist Episcopal Church 1845-1939, Vol. III, Widening Horizons 1845-95* (New York: The Board of Missions of The Methodist Church, 1957), 94.

appropriate to their time of life.”²⁹ Children often display wonder and awe through their own spirituality. Adults who value a child’s innate spirituality learn of God through the child’s wonder.

James Fowler, an American scholar in faith development maintained, “. . . that a basic disposition to trust in the very young child is foundational, we might say, the ‘embryo of faith’.”³⁰ The church nursery becomes the most important place for nurturing trust. Fowler suggested that by the age of two a child moved into intuitive-projective faith. “During this period, faith is experienced intuitively rather than with formal logic. The first conscious images of God form at this time.”³¹ Young children will experience faith from their families and from spiritual play of God’s stories in the church nursery. This intuitive faith is the innate spirituality of a child.

Theology

God lives in the tiniest souls. Very young children use their gift of awe and wonder in connection with God. Their theology will not look the same as an adult’s theology. They model a way of life in God’s kingdom. A grandmother told this beautiful story of her four-year-old grandson: “Gran, I have something to tell you.” She expected a typical preschool request, but instead, he told her that when he was first born, he was very, very sick and died. He paused, and repeated to his grandmother that he died and Jesus came and said “Wake up! Wake up! And I did.” His grandmother remembered the

²⁹ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 155.

³⁰ May, *Children Matter*, 85.

³¹ Ibid.

summer evening of his birth when immediately the nurses whisked him to the newborn intensive care unit. His mother kept loving vigil, while machines breathed for him. His family prayed for him. Then one night, the tiny child pulled the tube from his nose and began breathing on his own. Grandmother heard the voice of Jesus summoning a soul to live and saw how easy it should be to say yes to God.³²

This grandparent recognized what the authors of *Children Matter* say about helping children to feel valued. “When we listen to children and take time to play with them or read to them, they realize they are important to us.”³³ Assuming the position of listening to a child’s innate spiritual gift offered the child affirmation rather than a giggle which would indicate triteness or unbelief. It was possible that this child repeated the way he understood what a parent or other adult had told him about his birth. It was also possible the grandchild experienced God coming to him through Jesus. This need not be defined in any other way than listening and learning the impact of the conversation on not only the child, but also the adult’s faith journey.

Innate spirituality is a mystery. In Marjorie Thompson’s words, found in her book, *Family: The Forming Center*, referred to the “mysterious . . . seemingly innate, untaught knowledge of God.”³⁴ God resided in people before the beginning. A holy mystery of wisdom revealed God to the grandmother as the preschool child practiced sharing his theology.

³² Trudy Stillwell White, *Summoned to Life*.

³³ May, *Children Matter*, 152.

³⁴ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Family: The Forming Center* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1996), 15.

Who can say when, in a child, the dance with God begins? No one. Not even the child can later look back and remember the beginning of it, because it is as natural an experience (as early and as universally received) as the child's relationship with the sun or with his bedroom. And the beginning, specifically, cannot be remembered because in the beginning there are not words for it. The language to name, contain, and to explain the experience comes afterward. The dance, then, the relationship with, faithing, begins in a mist.³⁵

The foundation for Sofia Cavallettie's work with children in Christian education "... is the belief that children are spiritual beings."³⁶ The innate spirituality of infants and toddlers claimed by David Jensen stated in his writings: "If infants, too, are God's partners, this implies that partnership is not something we create. Partnership is God's endeavor not ours, and we stand in the light of that divine initiative."³⁷ Jensen affirmed the innate spirituality of children when he stated, "To understand children in God's image, moreover, is to reject the multiple attempts to mold children in *our* image."³⁸ He also said, "The words we use for God, Christ, and creation shape not only our understanding of the mysteries of Christian faith, they inform our response to those mysteries."³⁹ Yust claimed, "The theological concept of a humanity created in God's image encourages the presumption that the capacity for religious awareness is innate in human beings. To some extent this capacity is realized in the common sense of wonder

³⁵ Ibid., 19-20.

³⁶ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 181.

³⁷ David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 127.

³⁸ Ibid., 43.

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

which toddlers bring to their lived experience.”⁴⁰ All of these scholars affirmed a child’s innate spirituality. It was the work of the adult to give attention to God’s beautiful mystery in a child. Then God’s wisdom is revealed.

Jensen stated that Thomas Aquinas assumed children “. . . are not of an age where contemplation and the full use of rational capacities are possible.”⁴¹ He spoke more directly regarding infants and very young children, “So long as he has not the use of reason he is like a non-rational animal.”⁴² When this stance was enforced, adults lacked an attitude of opening themselves to God’s holy wisdom.

Tilden Edwards, leader in the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland said, “‘Knowing,’ in its largest sense, refers to the variety of ways we experience life, as well as how we appreciate and interpret our experience. As such, it includes but is not limited to our cognitive activity.”⁴³ Cavaletti noted Arago-Mitjans’ observation, “. . . the ‘particular joy’ the child shows when praying, and that when the child is involved in religious activities his ‘whole being vibrates, becomes tranquil, and rejoices’.”⁴⁴ Edwards quoted Thomas Merton regarding the mystery of one’s soul. “At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which . . . belongs entirely to God, . . .

⁴⁰ Yust, *Toddlers Spiritual Formation*, 140.

⁴¹ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 8. quoting Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964.), II-II.10.12.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Director Spiritual Companion: Guide to Tending The Soul* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 45.

⁴⁴ Sofia Cavaletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: The Description of an Experience with Children from Ages Three to Six*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter & Julie M. Coulter (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 40.

This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.”⁴⁵

Children act out of the nothingness and show God’s glory only if adults pay attention to this wonderful mystery of a child’s innate spirituality. Tilden added, “. . . this point of nothingness in us is where we become constantly pregnant with the Holy Spirit’s energy.”⁴⁶ In the nothingness emerged God’s action in the child. The work of the adult’s openness to observing this work of God exuded the Holy Spirit’s energy and joy!

Jürgen Moltmann spoke of spirituality in this way: “Just as God is in Christ by virtue of Christ’s messianic mission, so Christ is present in every child. Anyone who ‘receives’ a child receives God.”⁴⁷ Children teach spiritual lessons. When an adult was able to relinquish their ownership of God’s knowledge and wisdom then revelation might be experienced.

This innate spirituality formed identity. When Sarah was three years old she answered the question from her grandmother, “Do you remember God talking to you when you were a baby?” She answered, “I was in my mommy’s tummy.” The question posed again, “Do you remember talking to God?” She repeated, “I was in my mommy’s tummy.” A third time, with the question rephrased, “Yes, Sarah, and what did God say to you when you were in mommy’s tummy?” She paused for a moment and said, “I love you, Sarah.” A blessing poured over her grandmother, who asked the questions and thought to herself, “She is absolutely right, that is what God says to us!” Sarah’s

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Spiritual Director Spiritual Companion*, 31-32.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Spiritual Director Spiritual Companion*, 32.

⁴⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *In The End-Beginning*, 13.

spirituality not only shaped her, but her spirituality guided and shaped others listening for God's leading.

Maria Montessori said, "Children are different, . . . and cited Emerson, . . . that the child is the eternal messiah who returns again and again among fallen men and women, in order to lead us into the kingdom of heaven."⁴⁸ Sarah was that child. "The baby Jesus comes into the world not to ignore the stigma of the vulnerable, but to enflesh it."⁴⁹ God's presence is among God's people as the infant Jesus. God created humans in the image of God. Therefore, God's presence is among us through the gift of each child, giving flesh to the Giver of Life. It came through a relationship and connection that brought hope into the world.

The innate spirituality of a child is a blessing. Matthew Fox, a twentieth century theologian, contended, ". . . 'blessing' is the theological word for 'goodness,' original blessing is about original goodness. . . . This blessing awareness will motivate us to hopeful-and generous-actions."⁵⁰ When one sought blessings in a frightening diagnosis, or the blessings in a job loss or career promotion, renewed hope was created. When noticing God's blessings, positive attitudes and encouragement thrive. A child's spirituality becomes radiant.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore wrote in the forward of Jensen's book: "When systematic theologians of the last century spoke about human nature and redemption,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁹ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 21.

⁵⁰ Fox, *Original Blessing*, 7.

they meant without hesitation, adult nature and adult redemption.”⁵¹ Much attention has focused on adults and the way they learn, their faith development and spiritual formation. In comparison, very little study focused on children’s faith development and spirituality and even less on infants and toddlers.

It has been in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries where developmental experts brought thoughts of how children developed physically and spiritually. Believing that children bless others with their innate spirituality offered renewed life and hope. Jesus surely smiled at the wonders and expressions of a young child sitting on his lap. When a little child radiated a face full of awe, the adults around them smiled, too. Children are a gift. If unable to focus on hope, it may be due to the heavy emphasis the western Christian culture placed on the doctrine of original sin developed by Augustine. This affected how children received and experienced the Christian message from adults. This taught that one could only attain spirituality once they could verbalize the difference between sin and goodness and ask for salvation. The revivalists acted on this doctrine of original sin, “Thus children were urged, just as adults were, to undergo an emotional repentance and a conversion experience.”⁵² In the history of the Christian church, original sin spoke of children as incapable of having relationships with God until they reached a certain age. Children were of low value. Fox introduced the concept of original blessing. Turning thoughts and actions from working out of a doctrine of blessing rather than sin brought attitudes which valued a child’s spirituality.

⁵¹ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, vii.

⁵² May, *Children Matter*, 105.

Marcus J. Borg, professor of religion at Oregon State, focused on self-worth and the impacting results that took place when acknowledging spirituality of another.

Christian identity formation involves the deepest level of the self, the heart. It addresses what is perhaps our deepest psychological wound: our sense of not being “enough”. The sense of not having measured up is sometimes the result of a requirements-and-rewards version of the Christian message, one that emphasizes that “we are all sinners” much more than it emphasizes the love of God.⁵³

What a profound statement when raising children! An ignored child or a child who received hurtful words and told, “You are bad,” has a deflated heart and soul. These attitudes and actions thwart a child’s identity and potential for growth. Borg continued, “Addressing this deep sense of identity, this lack of self-worth, is basic to Christian identity formation. Indeed, it is the most basic message of the gospel.”⁵⁴ In simple and familiar words Borg stated:

You are created by God.
You are a child of God.
You are beloved by God.
You are accepted by God.⁵⁵

Borg emphatically emphasized that the Christian message of these statements are unconditional, and if not internalized “. . . nothing of significance will change in our lives.”⁵⁶

Claiming God’s blessing names the goodness within a child and empowers God’s people to make a difference in the world. “What a difference it makes to teach our

⁵³ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering A Life Of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), 191.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

children that they are blessings first and ‘sinners’ only second.”⁵⁷ This assumed that children have an innate spirituality. Adults act in ways that bless the child with words of encouragement that shape God’s goodness within the child. Both the child and child received a blessing in this relationship of modeling goodness.

Bible

The prophet Isaiah declared, “All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the prosperity of your children.”⁵⁸ (Isaiah 54:13) This indicated God’s presence already within the children working through their innate spirituality. God was already with Hannah’s child, Samuel. After she weaned Samuel she brought him to the house of the Lord. (I Samuel 1:24) In Genesis, chapter one, the creation story is told. Claiming the blessings of the Creation story meant that toddlers are “. . . good and faithful because of the one who made them.”⁵⁹ The book of Exodus told the story of baby Moses. His mother saw the innate spirituality of Moses. Scripture pointed out that she “saw that he was a godly child,” and hid him for three months. (Gen. 2:2) Isaiah 11:6 called upon the spirituality of a child to lead.

Jesus valued children. He came close to the vulnerable, the ones thought to be lacking in value to the kingdom or unworthy of taking up his time. The disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus. In their thinking, the children were too immature.

⁵⁷ Fox, *Original Blessing*, 4.

⁵⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

⁵⁹ Yust, *Toddler Spiritual Formation*, 149.

“ . . . Jesus dismisses their objection, embraces the children and blesses them, calling them blessed because they already possess the kingdom of God which he proclaims and embodies.”⁶⁰ Moltmann also noted, “The Greek words for child and slave have the same root. Even in the New Testament words like ‘childlike’ or ‘children’ are used disparagingly.”⁶¹ “Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.” (I Corinthians 14:20) “They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep’.” (Luke 7:32) “This makes the high rank that Jesus gives children all the more remarkable’.”⁶² In Luke 9:47, Jesus placed the child “alongside” rather than in their “midst.” This partnership raised children to a place of prominence which recognized the spirituality of the child.

The authors of *Children Matter* asked the question, “At what point along that journey is the child Christian? Can we know, or do we need to?”⁶³ Instead of trying to give spirituality to children, it would be far more beneficial to receive and nurture the gift they have already received. Instead of trying to figure out the answers to the above questions, the authors pointed to Jesus’ message to focus “. . . on the need to encourage the child’s coming to him, to be careful not to hinder that coming, and to celebrate the child’s love for him.”⁶⁴ These authors pointed out that the Gospels did not describe

⁶⁰ Moltmann, *In The End -The Beginning*, 12.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ May, *Children Matter*, 51.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

children in the process of growing in their faith but the Gospels gave stories where “Jesus referred to children as ‘little ones who believe in me’.”⁶⁵ Both Mark and Matthew spoke of the importance of children by telling of the consequences of interfering with the little ones who believe in Jesus. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matt. 18:6 and Mark 9:42) The passage, repeated again, with only a few word changes “. . . millstone hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” (Luke 17:2) Three times this warning was given! This displayed a valuable connection between God and children.

“It is the psychology of Jesus in the parable of talents – that we are here to expand our gifts and not, ‘*out of fear*,’ to bury them.”⁶⁶ For many centuries, adults have buried the spiritual gifts of children. Perhaps adults are fearful of a child’s questions. Adults may think of themselves as inadequate because they do not know the “right” answers. Maybe the fear of play made one seem inadequate in the knowledge of God. Often adults comment, “Oh, they are just playing.” This comment implied play as trivial and unimportant. When, in fact, an adult entered into play with the child they became engaged in relationship and new discoveries revealed about God and God’s kingdom. Too many times adults think first of what is or is not appropriate for an adult. Jesus taught us that children have something to offer to all of God’s people. Children came but the kingdom already belonged to them.

Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Fox, *Original Blessing*, 84.

receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:14b-16).

Jesus indicated to the scribes and chief priests the innate spirituality of children as he admonished them saying “. . . Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” as he entered Jerusalem to the shouts of children.

Additional Support for This Assumption

A growing field of interest, in the most recent years, studied the brain and how people learn. “We now understand that the first forty-eight months of life are critical to the brain’s development. While researchers have always known that infant development was important, they never knew just *how* important. Wayne State neurobiologist Harry Chugani says the experiences of the first year ‘can completely change the way a person turns out’.”⁶⁷ Again, evidence pointed to the important role of acknowledging a child’s spirituality, the role of the church nursery and the relationship the church has in nurturing families of young children. Psychologists Bernice and Richard Lazarus proposed that our “Emotions engage meaning and predict future learning because they involve our goals, beliefs, biases, and expectancies.”⁶⁸ Hearing this information was another reason why it was important for children to experience validity of their spirituality and affirmation of their partnership with God.

⁶⁷ Eric Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998), 20.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 93.

Fields of educational work strongly emphasized valuing children's spirituality. The work of Jerome Berryman, theologian and Christian educator in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, demonstrated the spirituality of children as he worked with metaphor and symbol and the art of teaching religious language through what he named as *Godly Play*.⁶⁹ Maria Yust, Barbara Bruce and others gave a wealth of new scholarship. This exciting research has potential for awakening the adult mind to honor the innate spirituality of a child and discover ways to help a young child express it.

Therefore, leaders in history who valued childhood support the author's first assumption that children are born with an innate spirituality. Other support was shown by theologians who opened their hearts and minds to observe God's work in children and through stories of Jesus which pointed to the value of children in God's kingdom. Brain research helped in understanding how children learn and the educational support valued a child's spirituality.

Second Assumption: Families Nurture a Child's Spirituality; The Child Nurtures the Adult's Spirituality

A child's innate spirituality is nurtured by their family as the family recognizes, affirms and nurtures that spirituality toward an increasing wholeness; especially through prayer and holy listening. When children's spirituality was acknowledged, adults learned from them and the adult's faith grew as well.

⁶⁹ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play*, 19.

History

John Westerhoff, Professor of Religion and Education at Duke University put together the following overview of history regarding the role of parent in Christian nurture. “. . . St. John Chrysostom wrote a treatise entitled *On the Right Way for Parents to Bring up Their Children*. From the first to the fifteenth centuries pronouncements were issued condemning parents for the neglect of their children’s nurture and cajoling them to assume their God-given responsibility.”⁷⁰ This movement would force parents to take seriously their spiritual parenting role. “Erasmus in the fifteenth century stressed the central importance of home life, parental example, and direct parental religious and moral instruction of children.”⁷¹ The home, a place for religious instruction, was the place to model the disciplines of faithful living and give children tools for living in and through challenging times in life. “Sir Thomas Elyot, . . . sixteenth century, emphasized the significance of the early years and wrote that from the day children are born they will be blessed or cursed by their parents’ example and home environment.”⁷² Environment and people play a huge part in the child’s experience of knowing God.

“Martin Luther emphasized the role parents play in the education of the children and urged fathers to instruct their children in religion at least once a week.”⁷³ Parents were urged to develop rituals that practiced the disciplines of faith. “John Calvin

⁷⁰ John W. Westerhoff III, *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, Inc., 1980), 85.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid, 85-86.

frequently preached on parents' responsibility for the religious education of their children."⁷⁴ It was adults, with their great knowledge, who needed the scolding for not taking responsibility for raising their children in the faith. "In the seventeenth century, John Comenius held that the Christian home was the primary agency for molding a child's religious nature."⁷⁵ These values would be life giving.

Through the urging of church leaders families found the information needed to help their child practice this religious nature. Rousseau, in the eighteenth century stated, ". . . the nurture of children began at birth in the home."⁷⁶ What a perfect time, for families out of spiritual practice, to begin living in an attitude of prayer. The voice of Horace Bushnell from the nineteenth century, ". . . stressed his opinion that the family as a social group is such that the spirit and character of parents inevitably influences the lives and character of their children. . . . 'Let every Christian father and mother,' he wrote, 'understand that when their child is three years old that they have done more than half of all they will ever do for their character'."⁷⁷ If children are at the bottom of the list of priorities, parents have only a brief window in time to begin their spiritual habits again. George Albert Coe, twentieth century, wrote, ". . . parents must habitually speak of God as an actual present reality in their own lives."⁷⁸ It was through this actual speaking and practice of acknowledging God's presence that families nurtured each other best.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 86.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 88.

Many of the children's spirituality scholars of this century look to Bushnell in relation to the family nurturing the child. The authors of *Children Matter* wrote, "Bushnell said the family is the critical component in faith education and encouraged parents to take seriously this responsibility."⁷⁹ This serious responsibility could not be neglected if the child was to receive the faith of their parents. Jensen quoted Horace Bushnell from his book *Christian Nurture*, ". . . that the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."⁸⁰ In order for this to happen, parents need to invest their time with their child and their child's play. A promising spiritual relationship between adults and children develops from this interaction. Families who allow their children to decide whether or not they participate in actions that nurture faith may find their family struggles in coping during times of stress. Parents need to take authority in their children's religious education. Jensen referred to one of Bushnell's most important beliefs in the history of Christianity, "Play is one dimension of the organically connected life, in which children instruct *us*. Parents who nurture, in turn, are nurtured in play by their own children"⁸¹ Bushnell's advice was for parents to ". . . play with your children."⁸²

Sometimes adults do not want to play with children and want to do "adult" activities. Often these activities are selfish. When adults say "no" to play, it may be due to their own weariness or problems internalized. How hurtful to a child or anyone longing

⁷⁹ May, *Children Matter*, 105.

⁸⁰ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 55, quoting Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908): 10.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 56.

⁸² *Ibid*.

for a relationship with someone whom they love. “In Bushnell’s eyes, children’s play is sacred *and* subversive . . . To play with someone, by definition, is not to control, but to let be. What is really enjoyable about children’s play is not the activity that one has structured, but the *surprise* that comes in the midst of it.”⁸³ Surprisingly there are times when an adult enters into play and problems lighten and energy renewed. The surprise may well be the mystery of God. This author has experienced the joy and wonder when engaged in play with her grandchildren, Nathan and Sarah. Sometimes they choose to pretend they are in the pulpit preaching, or play in the mud and feel God’s good earth. The smiles displayed from ear to ear while holding a Bible or showing off their mud faces becomes priceless and a gift of God’s joy. “Perhaps by playing with children, we recognize again our undeniable need for each other. When we delight in the beauty of a child at play, we rejoice in the mystery that the child *is*.”⁸⁴ Jensen claimed that “Indeed, the closer one reads Bushnell, it becomes increasingly clear that the nurture of children is at the same time the nurture of the caregiver. When we attend to children and play with them, adults, too, are changed.”⁸⁵ Adults experience God’s wonderful gift of life through children and play.

Theology

Parenting the spirituality of children required intentional attention. This responsibility of utmost importance required not only recognizing and affirming the

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

spirituality of the child, but practices the gifts of spirituality. Adults model their own life disciplines of prayer and holy listening. “Parenting is a deeply religious practice of gift stewardship, involving care and nurture of children as divine gifts.”⁸⁶ “Parenting is a religious practice in which the theological beliefs and actions that constitute a life of faith are embodied, taught, and tested in parents’ relationships with children.”⁸⁷ Honoring a child as Jesus would not only teaches but also reminds adults of what they are to model as they walk the journey with their child. This was faithful living.

Adults model religious language as they relate to the child. Religious language included stories, music and rituals as Yust pointed out in Brueggemann’s second assumption for faith formation.⁸⁸ This empowered the child to feel comfortable and familiar with the language as they grew through each developmental stage in their faith. This author attended a Christian education seminar, years ago, in which the topic related to how we grow into mature adults. Three points stood out, for this author, which has been passed to parents throughout her ministry career. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain echoed these same ideas in his article *What Makes Faith Mature*.⁸⁹ These included:

1. Allow children to experience their parents’ prayer life.
2. Allow children to talk about faith, ask questions and hear theological discussions in the home.
3. Share compassion with others as servants to those in need.

⁸⁶ Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press), 244.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 245.

⁸⁸ Yust, *Toddler Spiritual Formation*, 134.

⁸⁹ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *A Mature Faith*.

Parents who open themselves to this type of spiritual vulnerability with their children open up avenues of growth for their entire family. “To be vulnerable means ‘to expose oneself to possible harm and injury.’ But it also means to acknowledge dependence on and connection with others.”⁹⁰ This vulnerability was observed in infants and toddlers. The young child cannot prepare a meal or get dressed without the parent’s help. The child relies fully on the other to love and care for them and to teach them the best ways to live in God’s world.

Theologians have rarely recognized the deep theological dimensions of vulnerability-in-relationship so characteristic of infancy. What some of the classic theologians have dismissed as the hallmarks of selfishness—the wails of hunger, the cries to be held—are actually the marks of relationship and dependence of life in God’s world.⁹¹

Jensen stated, “Infants cry not out of selfishness, but to speak of a profound need for another: one who will provide food, touch, and the soothing presence of human attention. . . . Infants are vulnerable unto others for their lives; without others they will die.”⁹² Adults need children to remind them of the importance of relationships and how life can be celebrated more fully. How profound to discover that adults learn from infants the importance of relationships, especially a relationship with God.

This author observed a young mother caring for her infant child. She gave the child comfort and safety by holding the child in her arms and looking into the child’s eyes. It was a connection of closeness and intimacy. Both mother and child’s faces

⁹⁰ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, viii.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹² *Ibid.*, quoting Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 27-28.

glowed with God's glory. An intimate relationship of trust, between parent and child, described the relationship God desires.

This relationship required communication and that communication with God came through prayer. Many adults commented that they find it difficult to pray. The primary excuse this author has heard included the phrase, "I don't know how to pray, you are the trained one, you pray." "To learn to pray is not to learn alien speech, but to pay closer attention to the world that surrounds us and to the God who creates that world in love."⁹³ Children seemed much more at ease than adults did. It was the parents' responsibility to encourage prayer which created ease when asked to pray within a community. Modeling prayer brought prayer to a ritual. This ritual gave comfort in the practice of prayer. Claiming the joy of a relationship with God through prayer was freeing and comforting.

Children depend on their parents to know God. Very young children see their parents with the attributes of God. Therefore, it was important how parents portrayed the image of God.

Toddlers become capable of simple God representation at the same time that they begin to engage in pretend play, usually in the second year of life. . . . For the typical toddler, 'God' appears to fit best into the same category as a primary adult caregiver, usually a parent. Thus, the child's earliest concept of God generally mimics that child's understanding of his or her parental figures.⁹⁴

"Parents have the awesome privilege of being 'God's love with skin on' for their children. The way parents love and relate to their children, day in and day out, in good

⁹³ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁴ Yust, *Toddlers Spiritual Formation*, 145.

times and bad, is the most powerful influence on their formation.”⁹⁵ Children can experience the presence of God when the adults give their full attention to the child. Then the child was blessed by the adult’s time and touch.⁹⁶ This was an example of the action of holy listening. “The messages children hear, the experiences they have, inform and confirm the people they are. When rejection exceeds acceptance, moreover, they may wind up believing themselves only worthy of refusal, participating in their own dance of destruction.”⁹⁷ Barbara Bruce stated that it takes four positive phrases to overcome one negative comment.⁹⁸ This would be devastating and an another example of Jesus’ words about the stumbling blocks that adults place in the path of a child’s journey of faith.

Parents who depended on and connected with their child’s spirituality affirmed the blessings and goodness of God found in their child’s uniqueness. They received their children’s spirituality as a gift that connected their own spirit closer to God. “. . . part of the gift-status of children to their parents comes as children offer their parents a new identity as *people called to see and love children as if through the eyes of God*.”⁹⁹ When we look at a child playing with a sibling or friend in the water sprinkler, what would God see and love? It was an opportunity to celebrate God’s goodness, joy and beauty through the eyes of the child. “Children do not play to accomplish something, but for the joy of the moment. In the immediacy of child’s play, the future has little bearing: what matters

⁹⁵ May, *Children Matter*, 153.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 154.

⁹⁷ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 97.

⁹⁸ Barbara Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain*, 51.

⁹⁹ Mercer, *Welcoming the Children*, 246.

is the awareness that right here, right now, I am delighting with my playmates.”¹⁰⁰ Adults learn from children how to seek joy and accept the gift from God. It was important for parents to encourage their children in the things that brought joy rather than stress and anxiety. It was crucial to play which formed relationships with God and God’s people.

The relationship the toddler has with God was through what Donald Ratcliff, Wheaton University Professor of religious education, gained from Ronald Goldman and Nancy Smith’s work, “. . . parents mediate God to infants and toddlers through parental personification of the qualities typically associated with the divine: omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence.”¹⁰¹ Infants and toddlers need their primary caregiver to have insight into their needs, have authority and influence to keep them safe and be present to them all the time.

Bible

“God’s first recorded words to Adam and Eve are a blessing, a blessing involving children. . . . God blessed them, and God said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’, . . .”¹⁰² Bearing fruit not only means the birth of children but being fruitful as part of God’s family and part of God’s kingdom nurturing one another. This was a role of faithful parenting.

“John Dominic Crossan compared the actions of touching, taking, blessing, and laying on of hands to the officially recognized conduct of a father lifting up a newborn to designate its claim for life rather than death. Such a symbolic gesture signified the child’s

¹⁰⁰ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 130.

¹⁰¹ Yust, *Toddlers Spiritual Formation*, 145.

¹⁰² May, *Children Matter*, 26-27.

acceptance into the family rather than casting it out.”¹⁰³ Today, a family who brings their child before the church congregation for baptism is reminded of this new member in God’s family. This child is a gift from God for everyone to celebrate!

Proverbs gave urgent appeals to parents in nurturing their children. “Listen children, to a father’s instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight . . .” (Proverbs 4:1) Jewish families experienced faith in relationship with each other and with God. Children grew up knowing no other way than the Jewish lifestyle of faith. Children smelled the incense, tasted the salty tears, and danced the joys of God’s salvation history with their family and continue that same tradition still. “The lifestyle of God’s people, the feasts and visual markers in the land all caused children to ask questions. In these teachable moments, adults told the story of their powerlessness and God’s deliverance, faithfulness, and plan for the covenant people.”¹⁰⁴ The important step of adults living their faith in full view of their children helped children know where their family’s strength resided. Infants and toddlers do not have the cognition capabilities to remember and learn from these communal experiences because they are unable to organize concepts, but they can intuitively experience them and anticipate them happening again with the familiar sights and sounds that accompany the event celebrated.¹⁰⁵ This would emphasize the importance of ritual in the family. The child lived in the experience and remembered the practices of their family from year to year. They learned their story of faith.

¹⁰³ McLemore, *Let The Children Come*, 100.

¹⁰⁴ May, *Children Matter*, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Yust, *Toddler Spiritual Formation*, 135.

“Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:7-9) Deuteronomy 11:19 urged parents again in nurturing their child’s spirituality through their life experiences. Through these experiences families had teachable moments as objects of faith were visible. Children explored the objects of faith with questions and through their non-verbal spiritual play.

In the twenty-first century, families have few religious Christian rituals in the home. Families do not have resources for concrete ways of practicing their faith disciplines. Families need resources to help guide them in developing rituals.

The people of Israel used visual symbols to remind them of God. When father prayed, they strapped to their left hand and forehead small leather boxes containing selected verses from the Law. Selected verses were also placed in little boxes called *mezuzahs* and attached to the doorposts of the house. Each time they passed through the doorway, the Jews touched the *mezuzah* [Notes in *The Wesley Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 263] and were thus frequently reminded of God’s law. . . . What are the symbols in our homes? Do they remind us of God?¹⁰⁶

“Concrete symbols can provide opportunities for us to talk with our children about the things of God; the symbols, then, could remind them again and again of those conversations.”¹⁰⁷ This author began a ritual with her grandchildren, Sarah, age three and Nathan, age six. A ritual of worship based on Jackie Nowak’s model of Chapel Worship with pre-school children.¹⁰⁸ Each time the children spent an evening at Nanna’s house,

¹⁰⁶ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Nowak, *The Blessing Center* <http://www.blessingcenter.org> (accessed 17 January 2007).

they took a moment of Sabbath time. They sat on the floor around a lighted candle and the children settled into their own sacred space. Then the grandmother said, “This candle reminds us that God is always with us.” Together they sang *Jesus Loves Me*. A small soft stuffed animal was placed near the light. Grandmother explained, “When one of us holds the toy, we share what makes us happy or sad.” The children loved the sharing time and honored the time with attention to each other and to God. They closed with the song *God is so Good* and an echo prayer, “Dear God, thank you for families, for friends, and for teachers. Amen.” Grandmother was not sure how the children would respond to this new ritual, but children adapt to new. They were open to experience God, and they trusted their grandmother. Their little faces glowed, as they appeared glad for the time with God and the attentive listening from Nana. Sarah said, “Do it again”! This author knew that was the moment God smiled.

“In our homes and faith communities, what lead children to ask questions about God, the Christian life, and faith?”¹⁰⁹ Our Jewish family of faith had much to model for Christians in this century. To create a discipline it takes commitment to the ritual, but even if the experience happened only once, it would be significant, and the heartfelt response would be “Do it again.”

A young mother of twin boys, age four, came to the women’s Bible study. It was her first experience of a close up view of scripture and prayer with an intimate group of women. Just prior to the advent season, the lesson was on helping children understand the Christmas story. The women told story after story of teachable moments that shared the Good News of Jesus’ birth. The young mother was elated and eager to give it all to her

¹⁰⁹ May, *Children Matter*, 36.

boys. The group of women bought her children a non-breakable nativity set and shared stories of the importance of hearing the Christmas story read on Christmas day with all the family present. One parent shared that grandmother made simple costumes and handed out parts for all ages of family members to participate in the re-telling of the Christmas story. “. . . fathers make known to children your faithfulness.” (Isaiah 38:19) It was through such experiences that seeds of faith became planted into the hearts and memories of the participants. This atmosphere created a place for adults to have permission to dialogue about faith and interact with children about God’s stories.

“Give your servant therefore an understanding [listening, discerning] heart/mind” (1 Kings 3:9)¹¹⁰ Tilden Edwards used this passage in support of spiritual direction. As families play the stories of God they also share in holy listening with their children. The responsibility of parents was to give spiritual direction to their children and to listen to the leading of their children through the holy listening process. Margaret Guenther offered this advice regarding spiritual direction: “. . . spiritual direction is about, . . . ‘holy listening’, presence and attentiveness.”¹¹¹ Children love the practice of holy listening. This author first experienced holy listening at HeartPaths Spirituality Center, an adult spirituality center at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City. The three-year spiritual direction course taught the importance of imploring the Holy, God’s presence, into the conversation with another. The same was true when working with children. The blessings in working with children gave permission to include more experiential ways to practice holy listening including journaling through pictures.

¹¹⁰ Edwards, *Spiritual Director Spiritual Companion*, 6.

¹¹¹ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1992), 1.

In the spring of 2005, this author presented a Children's Spirituality Certification class to twelve people in her local church. As it came near the end of the ten-week course fifth grade children were asked to miss their own class and become a partner with an adult in the certification class. The task was for the adult to practice holy listening with "real" children. The adults were more nervous than were the children. The children gave up their time in class to allow the adults a practice time. Only two of the twelve children were familiar with holy listening. What adults discovered was the great need for children, in this fast-paced world, to have a time of silence, prayer, and a listening ear. Busy adults and children involved in many activities found very little time to listen and build relationships in significant and meaningful faithful ways. Children hunger for the listening ear, the positive attention to their needs and feeling valued. When adults gave their undivided attention and practiced holy listening with the children, God's presence was acknowledged. What transpired next was one of God's joyful surprises. The children asked to give up their last session of class, a party, to engage in holy listening.

The children's eagerness amazed the adults as did the children's openness and trust. The surprise was children sharing their joys and innermost pain with adults many had never met before that session. The child needed the attention and the adults needed the quiet reflection. "What a gift to bring to another, the gift of disinterested, loving attention!"¹¹² The children received that gift from the adult and the adult received the gift from God. This was truly spiritual direction.

Two important aspects of holy listening include touch and relationship. A touch signifying a blessing gave language to a non-verbal child as they connected with God in

¹¹² Ibid., 3.

that moment. The adult drew the sign of the cross on the back of the child's hand using oil. This reminder of God's presence and protection was for both the receiver and the giver. "Touch was a part of Jesus' blessing of the children, communicating his acceptance and love."¹¹³ We cannot survive without God's loving touch that comes through our family. Touch is healing. When grieving, a touch communicates empathy. When ill, touch comforts. When lonely, touch indicates others are present in the journey. When joyful, the touch through a hug celebrates! This says to a child, they are loved by a family and by God.

The relationship strengthened between the spiritual director and the child directee. In general, they look forward to seeing each other and are eager and ready for holy listening. At each holy listening session, the spiritual director or guide reminded the child that "as we light a candle for our time together, we remember God is present with us." God prepared this moment as a sacred time and space to listen for God's direction.

Sarah, age three and a half, took her blessing stick (chapstick) and freely shared with the family God's blessing. She drew the sign of the cross and said, "God created you, God Loves you. God is always with you, Aunt Christa." Sarah often has one of two responses, "Do you see the cross? Or "Smell it! It smells good." Sarah's responses are not spoken in a mundane voice, but a voice declaring real emotions of excitement and joy. Surely God wants this attitude and presentation of blessing from all God's children. Sarah's Aunt Christa, a newly-wed, called to say, "Mom, Sarah said the most beautiful words to me, today, as she shared God's blessing. Mom, when we have children, please

¹¹³ May, *Children Matter*, 42.

teach them about blessing. I would love that.” This young adult woman valued a child’s spirituality and recognized the importance of blessing.

Additional Support for This Assumption

In the twenty-first century, brain research suggested there was more a family might do as far as creating wholesome relationships and environments that encouraged the nurture of children. This author applied this to the nurturing of a child’s spirituality as well. “Newborns come into the world with sophisticated brains that are phenomenally wired for intellectual growth. . . . This cognitive development affects them for the rest of their lives. Thus parents have a tremendous responsibility and a sacred obligation to nurture their children in love and train them in the Lord’s paths.”¹¹⁴ “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” (Proverbs 22:6) This knowledge developed through brain research and supported the important role parents have in nurturing their young child. “There is a four-year period of ‘potential’ growth, which is the most critical period of human development. This time is from conception until about the third birthday. During this time, all things are possible – learning to walk, learning to talk, learning how to ‘fit in’ to society. Maria Montessori, years ago, called this time that of the ABSORBENT MIND.”¹¹⁵ Cavaletti noted that Montessori defined it as “an active force that motivates humankind not only to create the individual self but also to create a

¹¹⁴ *Wired for Learning: Promoting Infant Brain Development*
http://www.foreverfamilies.net/xml/articles/infant_brain_devt.aspx (accessed 24 February 2006).

¹¹⁵ Phyllis Porter, *Early Brain Development* <http://www.educarer.com/brain.htm> (accessed 24 February 2006).

unified creative totality with all of life.”¹¹⁶ The “Absorbent Mind” theory helped children go beyond what was expected of them. They had a way of learning that encouraged their potential. When parents are unified in modeling a spiritual life, a child grows in the knowledge of God’s love and grace and knows no other life. Parents who practice disciplines of faith within their family offer critical development to the brain. Sharing stories of living in the tough parts of life as well as celebrating the best times in life create synapses in the brain. In this, spiritual brain development is an “Absorbent Mind,” a great potential that is often untapped in church nurseries.

Kris Haig, a Presbyterian minister and spiritual director noted infants’ and toddlers’ developmental characteristics included trust, belonging, learning by doing, and learning autonomy and self control. Spiritual practices and messages pointed to how God cherished children, and how children explored knowing God.¹¹⁷ See Appendix G

“Studies suggest babies listen to words even though they cannot yet speak. All the words, understood or not, are contributing to the development of syntax, vocabulary, and meaning.”¹¹⁸ Often it was the voice inflection and facial expressions that the child receives from the adult. This transfers to the shaping of the child’s spirituality. “The ability to speak a language forms long before any language is spoken. Children are born with brain connections to speak any of the world’s three thousand plus known languages. The language they eventually speak is the one spoken in the child’s individual

¹¹⁶ Cavaletti, *Religious Potential of the Child*, 14.

¹¹⁷ Kris Haig, Hungry Hearts, Spring 2004, Volume XIII, Number 1, *A Developmental Perspective on Spiritual Practices* (Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church), 9.

¹¹⁸ Eric Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998), 23.

environment.”¹¹⁹ When spiritual language was practiced, including non-verbal language, children grew in an environment where they learned to connect with God. Eric Jensen noted the words of Janellen Huttenlocher from the University of Chicago, “Infants whose parents talk to them more frequently and use bigger, ‘adult’ words will develop better language skills.”¹²⁰ This author would affirm that religious language practiced consistently teaches a child the way of paying attention to God. This would increase the child’s way of communicating with God and adults communicating with others about the child’s theology.

This information proved powerful when applied to religious words or symbols. When a child, cradled in the arms of a mother singing songs of faith, heard her soothing voice and felt her warm touch, the child came to know her and the faith she sang. Barbara Bruce noted, “Music is the first intelligence formed, a precursor to spoken language.”¹²¹ “Even before birth, an infant is tuning into the melody of its mother’s voice. Over the next six years, its brain will set up the circuitry needed to decipher – and reproduce – the lyrics. A six-month-old can recognize the vowel sounds that are the basic building blocks of speech.”¹²² A young child’s basic building blocks for discovering their spirituality came through the experience of the parents’ non-verbal communications and the parents’ emotions. The soothing lullaby, the tense body when angry or afraid transferred to the child.

¹¹⁹ Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain*, 68.

¹²⁰ Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, 23.

¹²¹ Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain*, 71.

¹²² Kathryn Vaughn, *Wired for Learning*
http://www.foreverfamilies.net/xml/articles/infant_brain_devt.aspx (accessed 24 February 2006).

Yust understood Brueggemann's importance for toddlers to tell their story in their own way with actions and words. She also discovered that "Stern's extensive research into infant-caregiver interactive patterns has demonstrated that young children develop a sense of a verbal self by fifteen months (Stern, 1985).¹²³ If a child has experienced fifteen months of a mother's prayer life, then it would seem the child would also develop a prayer life. If a young child spoke a catchy phrase to a commercial, a young child could be nurtured in religious language, too.

Yust also referred to Fowlkes words, "Children, because of their repertoire of natural patterns of ritual play, have the capacity to engage in religious prayers and worship cast in the same or similar patterns."¹²⁴ She gave examples of a toddlers' way of telling their personal religious story which included ". . . join or echo the 'amen' at the end of a unison prayer . . . holding hands to share a blessing at the toddlers favorite fast food restaurant."¹²⁵ Parents should be relieved to know that it took only a simple one sentence prayer for their young child. This described the practice of religious language.

The physical surroundings affect the child's brain development. "An infant's environment has a dramatic affect on brain development."¹²⁶ Stimulating an infant's brain comes from the environment as well as the people in the environment. The room temperature, the sound of a lullaby, shouting voices, the mobile hanging over the crib, the

¹²³ Yust, *Toddler Spiritual Formation*, 135.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 136.

¹²⁶ *Building Baby's Intelligence: Why Infant Stimulation is Important*
<http://www.envisagedesign.com/ohbaby/smart.html> (accessed 24 February 2006).

sense of security or the lack of it create the environment.¹²⁷ These environments may stimulate a child too much or may calm the child. In any case, the environment stimulated the brain for growth. The same was true of how environments affected spiritual development. When a child's environment included symbols of the nativity set out each advent season, the child had the opportunity to wonder throughout each level of their development. When a child experienced ritual, it offered comfort and stability through repetition. The physical environment of a quiet space allowed the child a time to reflect and wonder with God, even without verbal language. A natural silence for young children.

Parents are part of the child's environment. They have prime opportunity to create more positive and more spiritual stimulation for the child's brain. The more words the infant hears, the more connections are made in the brain. Children need to interact with people to learn a language. They learn words by hearing them repeatedly. It was critical to engage them in conversation. (LaMorelle, 2001)¹²⁸ This conversation can be with words, symbol or play. "Thomas Groome challenges religious educators to view their students not as objects to be shaped but as persons for relationship."¹²⁹ It benefits the adult in their own faith shaping while interacting with children. "We know providing an environment that is rich and inviting can mold, shape, and literally create a child's brain."¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Porter, *Early Brain Development*.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ May, *Children Matter*, 144.

¹³⁰ Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain*, 135.

Creating foundational spiritual memories becomes, to a great extent, a shared responsibility. One hour per week in Sunday School will not keep the religious memory alive. Parents must create reinforcement by asking their children to retell and reflect on the biblical stories.¹³¹

Children are a gift and a blessing. Therefore adults should follow Bruce's advice, which was spoken of earlier in this paper, "Take every opportunity to tell children (little and big) how wonderful they are and how proud you are of them. Look for things to praise. . . Statistically, it takes a four-to-one praise –to-criticism ratio to keep students on track."¹³² I cannot imagine Jesus would have it any other way! Adults become productive when stimulated with and motivated by praise. It was a happier experience to work when encouraged. The pain of hurtful words and actions overwhelmingly defeats the positive. The child affected by such pain will find this detrimental to their learning and growing with positive spirits!

Christa struggled through high school and finally dropped out of school. Her parents kept praising her and encouraging her. Her environment created an attitude of "you can do it" and she graduated from an alternative school, completed four years of college and received her degree. If she had never received praise and encouragement, college might not have been Christa's vision.

Parents are the important relationships in a young child's life. Adults come to know and trust important relationships in their life. Therefore, it was important to help young children have confidence and trust in their parents and caregivers. "Children learn in the context of important relationships. The best way to help young children grow into

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 51.

curious, confident, able learners is to give them warm, consistent care so that they can form secure attachments to those who care for them.”¹³³ Young children do not have a choice in choosing their relationships. The parents or caregivers are the child’s advocates. This responsibility was for the child’s wholeness and wholeness includes spirituality.

Porter suggested the three points for parents in developing their child’s brain. First, it was important to establish rituals and routines. Routines of reading a particular book at bedtime taught young children to know when it was time for bed. These every day routines and rituals then became associated with pleasure and assurance for children. They became the memories children will have forever. Second, a child’s brain develops when provided safe places for exploration and play. The curious child explores their world and needs adults to help them have an environment of play that would be stimulating and safe. Third, parents who provided places for their children to succeed and recognized that each child was different offered avenues for brain development. Who the child became would be an attitude reflected by the parent’s attitude.¹³⁴ The home where an infant grew and developed had a powerful influence on her brain development. Parents who created a loving, stimulating, encouraging, and safe environment created a foundation for their children that will benefit them all their lives.¹³⁵ A spiritual environment laid also provides strength and support in times of crisis.

¹³³ Porter, *Early Brain Development*.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 43-44.

¹³⁵ *Building Baby’s Intelligence*.

“Dr. Spitz did studies in the 1940’s and found that infants need a loving, trusting adult to act as the interpreter of life experiences, otherwise they have no meaning.”¹³⁶ These adults also interpret spiritual meaning created out of symbol and play. It was the relationships in play which helped the child interpret meaning for life. This play revealed parental values and an understanding of God.

Karen DeBord stated, “Life shapes the brain’s development.”¹³⁷ This included touch, voice inflection and stress which stimulated the building of cells called synapses. “Touch lets the child know that ‘Yes, I am a wanted organism and it is worth survival’.”¹³⁸ “The brain defines who we are, and it is influenced by what we do.”¹³⁹ DeBord gave examples of how parents can nurture positive brain development through consistent loving care, touch, expressions, and language. DeBord suggested parents look for teachable moments as they relate to the child. Most importantly she suggested that parents mirror behaviors they expect from their children.¹⁴⁰

“Between ten and eighteen months, a baby’s emotions are developed. Emotions are closely connected with long-term memory.”¹⁴¹ This would be a critical time for parents to examine their own spirit and what they convey. They may project an attitude of anger and disappointment or it may be an attitude that fosters joy and optimism. When a

¹³⁶ Porter, *Early Brain Development*.

¹³⁷ Karen DeBord, *Brain Development*
http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/pubs/brain_nc.html (accessed 24 February 2006).

¹³⁸ Porter, *Early Brain Development*.

¹³⁹ DeBord, *Brain Development*.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

person has a sense of value, their self-worth is increased and emotions of anxiety and fear lessened. “The root of all emotional feeling is in the brain stem. It takes nearly one and a half years for a child to learn how to control her feelings. How well she does this depends solely on the parents.”¹⁴² The child’s watchful eyes mirror what parents value.

DeBord proposed that all experiences created a new connection or made an old one stronger. The more experiences created for a child, the more ways the brain was able to grasp new understandings as the child grew older.¹⁴³ Research has shown that the baby’s brain was designed to be extremely receptive to experience. The ability to learn often depended in part on the family genes (nature) and in part on the care, stimulation, and teaching the child received (nurture).¹⁴⁴ DeBord included suggestions to parents for nurturing the infant’s brain development. Interact with your baby using language as much as you can. Say your baby’s name often. Be responsive to your infant’s gestures. Give your infant room to move. Modify your home for child safety.¹⁴⁵ This author would suggest parents keep a spiritual frame of mind when these are put to practice. Pray with the child. Speak the child’s name with a blessing. Practice holy listening as your child moves and interacts with your presence. Keep the home a safe place where the child may experience wholeness and holiness. Let the home be a place for a child to create and discover their spiritual meaning.

¹⁴² Porter, *Early Brain Development*.

¹⁴³ DeBord, *Infant Brain Development* <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/braindev.html> (accessed 24 February 2006).

¹⁴⁴ *Wired for Learning*.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

“The brain is literally customizing itself for your particular lifestyle from the day you’re born. Soon after, the brain prunes away unneeded cells and billions of unused connections. It’s a time of enormous selective receptiveness. The question was ‘For what are you customizing your brain?’”¹⁴⁶ This author would encourage parents towards the spiritual customizing of the brain as they nurtured their child. This would include helping the child find meaningful ways to explore their faith and share the talents God has given them.

These studies, though not considered religious, are congruent with the Jewish family upbringing that we may presume Jesus experienced. BBSN concurs with these concepts of brain research. The practices suggested by these theorists and authors, applied through a spiritual lens, nurtured the child as God’s gift. God created people in a beautiful and amazing way. There is so much to learn about the brain, the body, and the spiritual connections.

The author’s second assumption that families nurture a child’s spirituality and the child nurtures the adult’s spirituality found support historically from leaders who asked parents to be faithful in the raising of their children which included modeling disciplines of faith. Theologians spoke of parental example and enforcing ritual to develop children’s spirituality and listening to a child’s spirituality. References from the Bible gave reminders of the importance of parents using symbols of faith for children to explore and claim in knowing they are a child of God. Lastly, brain research pointed to the importance of parents nurturing in the early stages of the brain’s development.

¹⁴⁶ Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, 21.

Third Assumption: The Church Family Supports Families in Nurturing and Blessing One Another

The church family, through its education and worship life, supports the nurturing ministry of families by offering safe and enriching space appropriate for families to learn and grow together. This support was provided through ideas, resources and guidance in the practices of nurturing children in a pattern that announces and channels the blessings of God.

History

Israel gave the best example of a family of faith nurturing children. “Israel valued and welcomed children wholeheartedly. At the center of Israel’s regard of children was its understanding of covenant. Children, as inheritors of the covenant, did not grow into God’s promises for the community, but were from birth participants in them.”¹⁴⁷ Having the church family observe young children as participants was a lens rarely used. Young children are viewed as too young to participate. However, it was the level of participation and the place where children participated that needed to be addressed.

The early church included children. Children were probably present as the apostle Paul baptized whole households. (Acts 2:41) These children were present to learn along with the adults in their family of faith. Later, “Comenius believed in a holistic education that would begin in infancy and continue through life.”¹⁴⁸ This life long journey does not wait for a child to develop an adequate reading level. “From infancy until the age of

¹⁴⁷ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 2.

¹⁴⁸ May, *Children Matter*, 98-99.

understanding, at seven, Luther placed the responsibility for nurturing a child's faith on both parents and the community as a whole."¹⁴⁹ "A traditional belief in many cultures is that brain development begins in earnest and children become teachable at about age seven."¹⁵⁰ These views are in stark contrast to the research of the twenty-first century. In fact, research shows that by age seven or eight, many children are already locked in achievement trajectories that can last the rest of their lives.¹⁵¹

It was the eighteenth century when Robert Raikes, developed the Sunday School ". . . in response to the plight of working poor children."¹⁵² Sunday School was not intended for young children. In the 1830's, Sunday School evolved from educating street children to Christian education on Sundays. This came about due to the development of public schools. The first Sunday School teacher, hired around 1780 or 1781, was to train the factory children in reading the scriptures and improve their values and behavior.¹⁵³

Soon to follow was the Second Great Awakening. "Powerful preachers such as Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) conducted revivals and camp meetings . . . The evangelists' zealous attitude and commitment to personal repentance and assurance of acceptance by God through Christ left a lasting mark on the evangelical church's ministry

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁵⁰ Porter, *Early Brain Development*.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² May, *Children Matter*, 101.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 101-102.

to children.”¹⁵⁴ Children had been with the family up to this point and now a shift began as Sunday School developed.

John Wesley had concern for children growing in faith and in his methodical way developed a plan for clergy to follow. He encouraged pastors to “. . . spend an hour a week with the children ‘whether you like it or not’; talk with them ‘every time you see any at home’; pray ‘in earnest for them’; diligently instruct the parents, and ‘vehemently exhort all . . . at their . . . homes’; ‘preach expressly on this.’ . . .”¹⁵⁵ Wesley directed preachers to “. . . formalize a group if at least ten children were in regular attendance.”¹⁵⁶ “Wesley was convinced that many children experienced genuine faith during their formative years. . . . Ministry to children was an essential part of being a Methodist preacher.”¹⁵⁷ Some rural and urban churches forget this admonition of Wesley. All churches benefit from Wesley’s actions. He was taking action and carrying out his faithful task of nurturing children in the family of faith.

“By the 1830’s, enrollment in public schools had grown to the point that Sunday Schools no longer held primary responsibility for the education of children. Thus the Sunday Schools now refocused on evangelical training and functioned as the religious complement to the public schools.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵⁵ W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman, George Eayrs, ed., *A New History of Methodism, Vol. 1* (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1909), xxxii.

¹⁵⁶ May, *Children Matter*, 103.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 104.

John H. Vincent was General Agent of the Sunday School Union in 1866. He had a reputation as a religious educator. He became the leading advocate for integrating the intellectual with the spiritual. He employed the public school organization into the church setting.¹⁵⁹ Vincent intended to accomplish making the Sunday School the Church school for all of its members, with graded instruction for all age levels.¹⁶⁰ What Vincent missed was the developmental age groupings. He had only four age groups into which he suggested the Sunday Schools divide. This did not provide appropriate graded lessons for everyone to use.¹⁶¹ In 1872 a committee prepared uniform lesson plans to study the whole Bible in seven years. Students of all ages studied the same scripture passage each week but soon it became apparent to educators that this did not work for young children. Finally, graded resources for children were published in the early 1900's.¹⁶²

“The word curriculum comes from the Latin *currere*, which means a course to run.”¹⁶³ A key role for the church family would be the definition of how the church leaders interpret curriculum. This author agreed with the comments from Maria Harris and John Lynn Carr who saw every part of the church as an avenue for teaching. “Christians are formed through the total life of the church, so a church’s life is its curriculum.”¹⁶⁴ Often, curriculum was considered as only the use of the Bible, or leaflets

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 98.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁶² Ibid., 193.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 191.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

that taught about Jesus. Actually, everything is curriculum. The environment, the words spoken or inadvertently unspoken, pictures on the wall or not on the wall, children in worship or not in worship, all teach something and therefore, is curriculum.

Sunday School for infants and toddlers probably developed out of a need for childcare while the mother taught an older Sunday School class. The priority for learning was aimed at adults who assumed young children did not have the cognitive ability to relate to the spiritual. The curriculum used for the infants and toddlers came spontaneously through the loving caregiver and the Holy Spirit's guiding.

"John Dewey, an educational philosopher, was light years ahead of his time. He spearheaded the movement that became known as 'progressive education'; which, over fifty years ago, was professing many of today's findings of brain research and learning. Dewey was among those who taught that hands-on education, teaching in the contexts of real events, was more powerful learning than using abstract concepts."¹⁶⁵

"Maria Montessori (1870-1952) . . . believed that children had a natural inclination toward learning because of their inquisitive nature and creative spirit."¹⁶⁶ When a young child walks a path they notice the bug, the flower, and all the small things adults allow to go unnoticed. Children are ready to explore because everything is new. Montessori ". . . sought ways to create a learning environment where children could explore and learn under the guidance of teachers who would facilitate the child's self-

¹⁶⁵ Bruce, *The Spiritual Brain*, 23.

¹⁶⁶ May, *Children Matter*, 106, quoting Anthony and Benson, *Exploring the History and Philosophy*, 351.

discovery.”¹⁶⁷ Montessori emphasized an environment prepared for children to invite them to learn and appealed for teachers to be aware of children’s readiness to learn. This had a broad influence in Christian education.¹⁶⁸

Montessori influenced theologian Jerome Berryman’s educational method. In 1972, he graduated from the Center for Advanced Montessori Studies in Bergamo, Italy. He named his method “Godly Play.” His goal was “. . . to teach children the art of using the language of the Christian tradition to encounter God and find direction for their lives.”¹⁶⁹ He developed six objectives to meet this goal. One, to model how to wonder; two, to show children how to create meaning with the language; three, help children make their choice to work on existential issues; four, to organize the educational time in a pattern of worship; five, to work together as a community; and six, to organize space so the Christian language is present in the room.¹⁷⁰ These objectives are included in BBSN and in the development of this act of ministry.

“The Theory of Multiple Intelligences comes from the work of Howard Gardner and was first published in 1983 in his book, *Frames of Mind*.”¹⁷¹ During this time it was thought that intelligence was measured on scores for only a person’s linguistic and mathematical skills. Gardner claimed there were other ways a person could be smart. He expanded the definition of intelligence. He suggested that intelligence had more to do

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Jerome Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 17.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Pam Schiller and Pat Phipps, *The Complete Daily Curriculum for Early Childhood* (Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, Inc., 2002), 12.

with how people solve problems and fashion products than performing isolated tasks on a test. Gardner believed everyone possessed eight intelligences at various levels and some could improve with practice over a lifetime.¹⁷² Infants and toddlers have the potential for these intelligences to develop, but at such an early age music and movement are the primary ways for learning.

Mercer shared her vision of educational ministries for children as that which contributed “. . . to the welcome and flourishing of children in the church. To realize that vision, the purpose and function of education with children is that of empowering them to participate in the practices of the community that are formative and constitutive of an alternative identity in the world.”¹⁷³ Those practices are introduced in the church nursery if the church family truly sees their role as an advocate empowering itself in the nurture of the young child. This would include elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture some of which are holy listening, hospitality, prayer, religious language, ritual and relationship.

Dr. Donald B. Rogers, Colonel Cowden Emeritus Professor of Christian Education, United Theological Seminary, developed a process of education that incorporated the whole experience. He called it “ESFI” which included enculturation, socialization, formation and instruction as a process which incorporated the whole towards a solid foundation in Christian education.¹⁷⁴ See Appendix H

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 204.

¹⁷⁴ Donald B. Rogers, “*ESFI*” (: United Theological Seminary, classroom handout).

In the twenty-first century, large churches began developing their own Sunday School curriculum and training methods. Some churches made these available for purchase.¹⁷⁵ Developing curriculum required a person or group, within the church, to understand the developmental and spiritual needs of each age-level as well as the theology shared on behalf of the church. These groups benefit in the knowledge of “EFSI,” Multiple Intelligences, Godly Play and other Christian educational theories and models. When a writer undertakes curriculum they must have knowledge of their audience. They need to have some knowledge of developmental characteristics, educational theories, and theology. Evaluation of curriculum has often been left out, but a crucial aspect in offering age-appropriate and theologically solid curriculum to benefit the child. When evaluating curriculum this knowledge proves to be very valuable. The goal was to strive for excellence in helping children and adults increase their connections with God.

“As Sunday School leaders throughout history have found, there is value in a coherent curriculum plan.”¹⁷⁶ The value of how we understand children learn makes a difference in the learning environment and curriculum. “Without clear aims, curriculum is directionless . . . Those aims should then guide the planning and evaluation of the total curriculum, including curriculum resources.”¹⁷⁷

Authors of *Children Matter* made a great insight when they raised the question, “Would I teach ‘pilgrims’ the same way I would teach ‘sponges’? What difference does it

¹⁷⁵ May, *Children Matter*, 194.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 196.

make if I envision my learners as passive, inanimate sponges or as active, growing, relational living beings? What are sponge-like activities? What are pilgrim activities? Does any of this matter?”¹⁷⁸ Raising these questions invited those who teach to reflect on their own style and method of teaching. Change may be just around the corner for the teacher!

Christian educator, Barbara Bruce suggested, “For young children, create a place of love and safety. When young children begin to associate with church or ‘God’s house,’ let it be with warm feelings of being loved and cared for because the brain functions best in an environment that is safe and nonthreatening.”¹⁷⁹ Teaching young children in this way does not mean they are sponges, but rather potters. They need an environment for creative play, to enjoy the messy and experiment in how to create meaning. They need the opportunity to shape others as well as experiencing the shaping of themselves. Bruce visualized the young child’s classroom as a place to hear biblical stories of God’s love in age-appropriate language, to provide visual symbols to imprint sensory information in the brain and offer toys that help children explore.¹⁸⁰

“If the goal is to help children meet God and experience God’s story, the space will look different from the way it looks if the goal is to teach the Bible to children.”¹⁸¹ For a toddler class toys teach and play draws them into relationships and life’s story.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷⁹ Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain*, 44.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ May, *Children Matter*, 252.

Therefore, the vision of such a space needs a joyful atmosphere where children feel invited and welcomed into God's space for learning.

"... young children, have limited language for expressing their spiritual experiences. Children who are raised in secular contexts may not have *any* vocabulary to talk about their spiritual awareness."¹⁸² For toddlers, it was the beginning of their second year of life. Only simple words and phrases are part of their vocabulary. They have not had time, in their short life, to develop a whole dictionary of language. "How the adults in the toddler's life, including those in the church community, speak to him helps to shape the child's burgeoning language. If children hear cursing, they learn to curse. If they hear thankfulness, they learn to be thankful."¹⁸³ The task of the church was to have people in the nursery who loved children and who loved God's language of awe and wonder. Bruce noted for children who have language, it is important to have wordless books in which "Children tell the story in their own creative way simply by looking at the pictures."¹⁸⁴ Bruce pointed out that the most important thing in the learning space was the teacher. The teacher who knows best how to relate to the child, who knows how the child reacts in certain situations and who loves the child has created a bond. Bruce reminded her nursery staff of their role, "Your primary ministry is to make certain that children know they are loved and cherished by God and by you."¹⁸⁵ Teachers need to take seriously what might happen when they are not present to the child. Children create

¹⁸² Ibid., 84.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 78.

¹⁸⁴ Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain*, 105.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 44.

relationship quickly. The child wondered what happened when the adult was not in their place. Bruce commented, “The brain flourishes in the chemicals that are produced by comfort and pleasure.”¹⁸⁶ This is the ideal church nursery!

Theology

Parents have been named as the primary nurturer in a young child’s life. Another important role in creating relationships came through connecting church family with the child and the child’s family. Spirituality is relational, and parents need the help of a church family in the nurture of their child’s spirituality. “God never intended two parents to bear the load of raising their children alone.”¹⁸⁷ Adding the church family to the equation enriched the spirituality of the child, the family and the church family. Today’s culture has many families with only one parent. These families would especially benefit from a connection with a church family. “The church lives into the promise of childhood when it becomes a sanctuary for children.”¹⁸⁸ The church family’s responsibility included how to develop a sanctuary created for raising holy and whole children. “The child’s dance with God begins ‘in the mists’ and is sustained in community – the community of faith.”¹⁸⁹ This community of faith stands in solidarity with the family through the joyous moments, the tender moments, and the moments when life hits bottom.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁸⁷ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 27.

¹⁸⁸ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 100.

¹⁸⁹ May, *Children Matter*, 20.

Karen Yust brought to mind the value of families connected to a church family. A child's life is enriched by the gifts of the faith community. The family grows stronger and the church family benefits from nurturing families.

Parents are the principal guides in children's spiritual formation, yet children need a religious community within which to experience God as something other than their own friend or possession. They need the benefit of others' discoveries about divine love and others' testimonies to the challenges of faithful living. They need to rub up against different ideas about God and experience the affirmation of shared understanding. They need opportunities to be shaped by communal rituals and practices that extend beyond the narrow confines of their immediate family so that they realize their kinship with other spiritual people. They need to recognize that their religious language belongs to many others and that they can speak their language outside the home as well as within it.¹⁹⁰

This partnership with children may mean that adults make themselves vulnerable in talking about their faith, praying and worshipping with children. "By becoming vulnerable with the children in our midst, we not only stake a claim with their lives, we also understand more fully what it means to be created in God's image and what it means to be church."¹⁹¹ The church family models a way of spiritual being for families with young children. The church offers opportunities for families to connect with other faithful families and learn how God blesses. Families learn to find their story in the midst of God's story. Yust referred to H. Bogot's article entitled *Making God Accessible: A Parenting Program*, "... children are not only born with the basic liturgical ingredients—wonder, joy, love, drama, and natural spontaneity – but they appreciate the opportunities to transform aspects of their world into personal as well as established

¹⁹⁰ Yust, *Real Kids Real Faith*, 164.

¹⁹¹ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 12.

declarations concerning God.”¹⁹² Adults who accepted the gifts children brought discovered God’s presence through the child’s eyes. A child celebrated with the community. When the child saw a tiny bug on the porch the child shared the good news and a blessing! The community became an important aspect of nurture.

Yust referred to Bogot’s idea on the importance of God-talk. Bogot noted, families who encouraged the telling of the faith narrative stimulated dialogue and understanding for the toddler to connect at their own cognitive level.¹⁹³ “Both children and adults need exposure to the grammar of the religious life so that they can understand and participate in religious conversation.”¹⁹⁴ Should conversation not be heard or non-verbal language not experienced by a child, they experience delayed or stunted growth.

A toddler’s ability to verbalize an awareness of God depended upon their ‘overhearing’ religious language and ‘seeing’ others apply this religious vocabulary in ways they could imitate.¹⁹⁵ The church family needs to assess regularly what affects the nurture of a child in their midst. Yust tells the story of a congregation that had a live audiovisual feed of its worship service in its church nursery. Young children watched their church family worship. Children who attended the nursery, on a regular basis, became familiar with songs and liturgy.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Yust, *Toddler Spiritual Formation*, 140, quoting Bogot, 1988, 514.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Yust, *Real Kids Real Faith*, 70.

¹⁹⁵ Yust, *Toddler Spiritual Formation*, 141.

¹⁹⁶ Yust, *Real Kids Real Faith*, 75.

“In word and sacrament, the church enacts an ethic of care for children.”¹⁹⁷ Not only does the church care for the child of nurturing and loving parents, but also the child with little or no support from home. Some caregivers find it hard to love children with an emotional or physical challenge. That is when the church became a sanctuary for all children. “Children are not ‘ours’ by virtue of biological makeup, but because of the covenantal and caregiving relationships in which we support children. In this sense, *all* children are adoptive children: chosen by God and entrusted to our care, . . . children chosen by God are given to us; that gift demands our response.”¹⁹⁸

“A theology of childhood rests not simply in *understanding* children, but radiates outward in circles of *care* and *advocacy* for children. Theological attention opens the church to the children in its midst, whether beyond or within the sanctuary’s walls.”¹⁹⁹ Church families do not realize they live out a theology for children when they nurture. This would be the ideal place for the pastor or staff to teach how child theology was communicated in their setting.

A child baptized in the United Methodist Church included a charge to that congregation. A responsibility given to the congregation assists families in the nurture of the child. Each time a child was baptized the congregation was reminded of their promise to all God’s children. The congregational response to vows of baptism was found in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. See Appendix J However, St. Luke’s congregation

¹⁹⁷ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 102.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

adhered to the liturgy from the 1964 *Book of Worship of The Methodist Church*, with a few word changes noted in parenthesis.

The minister addresses the congregation by saying: “(Members) of the household of faith, I commend to your love and care this child, whom we this day recognize as a member of the family of God. Will you endeavor so to live that he (she) may grow in the knowledge and love of the God the Father, through our Savior Jesus Christ?” The people respond saying, “With God’s help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.”²⁰⁰

Once the congregation assumed these vows the responsibility of the church family became a role of nurture and care. The primary function was to help children find ways to connect them with God. These vows were not to be taken lightly, and someone in the church family needed to take the lead to ensure the tools are provided to nurture the child as God intended. This person may be the pastor, the educator or a lay person advocating for the nurture of the child’s spirituality. “God created us for relationship – to need each other. God wants the church to be the family of God, to be there for one another, supporting, caring, and growing together. For most people, however, this will happen only if leadership in the church finds ways of helping people connect.”²⁰¹

“Infant baptism not only signals the full membership of children in the covenant, it also entrusts them to others for nurture and instruction.”²⁰² The role of the church nursery is a serious role. It was not a place for only babysitting, but for shaping a young

²⁰⁰ *The Book of Worship for Church and Home* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1964), 8.

²⁰¹ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 39.

²⁰² Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 106.

child's faith. Adults should nurture their own role with learning more about the child they care for in the nursery. "By baptizing children, the community of faith expresses its hope that children will grow into awareness of God's claim upon them and confidently affirm the grace already given them."²⁰³ This hope was the responsibility of the church family. Adults model their openness to the insights and awareness of God's presence. Adults model how to discover grace through everyday life experience. The young child's watchful eyes noticed and the child mimics the adult. The child begins to assume the adults' values.

"A church that baptizes, welcomes, and provides sanctuary for children will both teach children to pray and be taught by them."²⁰⁴ At age three, Sarah stayed in the church nursery during worship. After worship, she and her Nana walked into the sanctuary to see how beautifully decorated it was for the advent and Christmas seasons. Her Nana fully expected to teach her about the birth of Jesus using the pieces of the crèche on the altar. Sarah entered the sanctuary with bright eyes and ran down the isle, saying to anyone still in the sanctuary, "Come and see, come and see Jesus." She peered up at the exquisite crèche with Jesus in the manger. How appropriate for Sarah to exclaim with joy and enthusiasm the words "come and see." That was exactly what Jesus intended as noted by the authors of *Children Matter*. "The invitation 'Come and see, come and experience my blessing,' is extended to children."²⁰⁵ The church family was blessed by Sarah's actions. It did not matter to Sarah if the people she invited to come and see were people she knew.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 116.

²⁰⁵ May, *Children Matter*, 51.

She took adults by the hand and led them to Jesus! This demonstrated a church family's acceptance of nurture from a child. The child brought a gift to those open for learning more about God.

Brueggemann asserted that history-makers are not just adults, but toddlers, too.²⁰⁶ Each action taken, each word uttered contributes to history. This happens within a community. A relationship must be involved to interpret a child's contribution to that history. Yust noted, "Toddlers already are history-makers in unintentional ways through their bodily and social presence as incarnations of divine and human love and their ability to draw forth a nurturing love from their caregivers that imitates God's love for the world."²⁰⁷ Yust contended that when a toddler brings their personal story and their faith community's story into a dialogical and coactive relationship then as they grow older they will choose to engage in acts of compassion and justice.²⁰⁸

All members of the congregation share in the responsibility of educating and nurturing children. In this sense they all embody Karl Barth's theological claim that in the church, parents-but also all adult members—act as presbyters with coresponsibility for children. . . . They teach God's hospitality to children through their practices of welcoming children into the church's ministries.²⁰⁹

Too often, hospitality was intended for adults. Therefore, the church family may need to brainstorm around the issues of hospitality related to various age-levels of

²⁰⁶ Yust, *Toddlers Spiritual Formation*, 136.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 205.

children. What hospitality is offered to a six year old? What hospitality is offered to a six-month old child? “. . . hospitality is a gift of space, both physical and spiritual.”²¹⁰

The authors of *Children Matter* unknowingly described a BBSN environment. They named it The Dance with God model. The pace was slow. Voices were soft and gentle. Lighting subdued and colors soft. The space, full of materials for learning and worship, was made special.²¹¹ Yust included “. . . silence is an essential part of the spiritual life.”²¹² Therefore, the authors of *Children Matter* proposed the importance of providing such space. The church nursery is often far from quiet except for naptime. Children love to be held in quiet moments or to feel the calm in the midst of chaos. The playful music does not need to be in the background all the time. “In order for children to respond to the Holy Spirit, we need to create space for silence and help them become comfortable with it.”²¹³ Too often the one-hour Sunday School time has every second filled with doing something. If children are kept busy they do not have time to cause trouble. There is value in keeping children busy, but teaching a balance may be more valuable. Holy listening comes best in the silence; however, it was the adult who needed the silence in order to hear God’s voice in the child. “Listening means becoming comfortable with silence so that learners have time to formulate their thoughts and to say all that they have to say.”²¹⁴ Young children do this through their play.

²¹⁰ Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 14.

²¹¹ May, *Children Matter*, 20.

²¹² Yust, *Real Kids*, 97

²¹³ May, *Children Matter*, 71.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

Robert Pazmino, a professor of Christian education said, “Teaching at its best can foster a sense of wonder and awe about God and the amazing variety of God’s creation.”²¹⁵ Most church nurseries do a very fine job of fostering care. The question to ponder is how do adults develop a sense of awe and wonder if they are only engaged in watching and keeping children safe.

Remembering again, “If the goal is to help children meet God and experience God’s story, the space will look different from the way it looks if the goal is to teach the Bible to children.”²¹⁶ Ideas for such a space included candles, precious and beautiful symbols of lambs and crosses, mirrors for reflection, spiritual toys for prayer, crayons and pencils for journaling and clay. This type of space promoted exploration, imagination and wonder. Jerome Berryman,²¹⁷ a master at leading children with “I wonder” questions, quickly drew this author into the Biblical story. It was a training session to learn to tell God’s stories. The wondering, without someone giving “right” answers, caused this author to think differently about the stories. All ages could watch Berryman tell the stories and make meaning. This experiential way of participating in the story changed for the participant each time the story was told. When children and adults processed these meanings the discovery found was one of nurture and support to make it through life situations, both happy and sad. This cannot be done alone, but with God and God’s family to help each other. New revelations are illuminated as all God’s children are shaped by such experiences.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 264.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 252.

²¹⁷ Berryman, *Godly Play*,

“Children need churches committed to the nurture of the whole child for the whole of childhood.”²¹⁸ We do not need to pour theology into our young children, but provide them the tools or spiritual toys to help children connect with God. “Our goal is not to instruct the children in worship but to set the stage for them to meet God and to worship.”²¹⁹ Hadley taught, in her *Holy Listening* certification class, the importance of providing materials so children may set up a holy space for their time with God.²²⁰

“Montessori and Cavalletti found that children experienced God more meaningfully when adults created a special place in which children could worship in ways appropriate to their particular sensitivities and needs.”²²¹ What space should the church create, what type of environment arranged so very young children could meet God?

Yust shared this reminder, “Nurturing the spiritual lives of children, then, requires us to consider how we will communicate to them a sense of their belonging in the household of faith.”²²² Does the church nursery have caregivers or teachers who communicate hospitality into God’s family? Hospitality in the nursery needed to pay full attention to the child. This attention was for safety needs and for nurturing spiritual growth. Do the children in the nursery feel part of a church family? Having a person from outside the church as a caregiver seems inadequate in helping children feel part of the church family. The person may be the most congenial person in the world, but do they

²¹⁸ Ibid., 140.

²¹⁹ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 176.

²²⁰ Hadley, *The Holy Listening Method Training Course*.

²²¹ Ibid., 185.

²²² Yust, *Real Kids Real Faith*, 15.

impart values of the church family? Yust claims, “It is not enough to entertain toddlers and other young children until they are old enough to engage in cognitive reflection and attain a spiritual awareness more recognizable to adults. We must create contexts, point the way, share the stories and give directions that help toddlers express their spiritual experience in ways that transform who they are in the very real developmental stages in which they reside.”²²³ Should an outside person be charged with caring for the spiritual growth of the children, then training is crucial in passing on what the church expects and hopes from the caregiver.

Hospitality for children can be thwarted by a church focused on the doctrine of original sin. Church families probably are unaware of how they live into a doctrine of original sin.

Some churches believe that the effects of original sin are addressed through infant baptism. Other churches hold that original sin separates the child from God, and they desire to bring the child to God at a young age as soon as possible through prayers of confession and repentance of sin. . . . Still other churches see Christ’s redeeming work on the cross as sufficient for supplying grace, often referred to as prevenient grace, which keeps young children safe from the damnation of original sin, should they die before they claim faith in Christ as their own.²²⁴

The doctrine of original sin comes from the fourth-century theologian, Augustine, noted earlier in this paper. In the Bible belt of the United States, this doctrine is still strongly practiced. Thus, when this doctrine resides in a church family, blessing theology is overlooked, ignored or perhaps it was not supported by lack of the clergy’s own education of the doctrine. Hospitality is neglected for the children because they are not at

²²³ Yust, *Toddler Spiritual Formation*, 149.

²²⁴ May, *Children Matter*, 53.

an age to understand. This theology is detrimental to the child, the family, and the church family. It is hurtful to be ignored or at the bottom of the list of priorities. “The doctrine of original sin can itself contribute to sin.”²²⁵

A parent described a time when she had to confront her babysitter. This sitter had told her children who were ages two, four and six, that they needed to be good and not sin. The sitter proceeded to tell the children about satan and evil. The parent responded back to the sitter that it was not her place to talk about such things. She hugged her children and told them God loves them very much and that some people have different views of God. She shared with them that this was not their family’s view. The sitter’s theology presented itself through her words and actions. However, she could present her theology just through her actions and still be devastating. In the Bible belt this theology is right and good; and yes, it comes through in caring for children. In the sitter’s understanding of God and sin comes her attitude of discipline. Thankfully the parent’s theology was one of blessing which the mother did not realize herself. The church has a lot to dialogue regarding child theology!

“ . . . before there was any sin on earth, there was blessing.”²²⁶ This author has taught adult Sunday School classes considered biblically literate; yet, class members are amazed when the topic of original blessing was taught. This author was raised in such a theology. It was as though the Bible began with original sin. Little was emphasized on the many blessings mentioned in the Bible. “Jesus never directly speaks of a child’s sin, nor does he imply that a child does not sin. . . . Jesus is concerned about sin, but that is

²²⁵ Fox, *Original Blessing*, 51.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

not where he begins in establishing a relationship. Jesus does not focus his attention on the sins of children; he simply opens his arms to them and blesses them.”²²⁷ Kolberg’s stages of moral development noted that before age four or five children do not engage in this cognitive practice. “Their egocentrism limits their ability to imagine a perspective other than their own and they presume their perspective is shared by others.”²²⁸ In regard to toddlers, Yust says that children do not concern themselves with moral development.²²⁹ Toddlers are concerned with play, comfort, assurance and love. The adults in the child’s life need to be concerned with how to portray a loving God. They are the ones who understand morality.

Matthew Fox stated as churches moved away from promoting a life in original sin the baptism theology became one of celebration. This was the time to celebrate new life instead of the focus to remove sin. “The sooner the churches embrace the more primitive doctrine of original blessing, however, the more compassionate our living will be.”²³⁰ Blessing births gratefulness and compassion rather than judgment and exclusiveness. Blessing was the way God intended for all ages to share life together. “Salvation is about life together. Salvation is about peace and justice within community and beyond community. It is about shalom, a word connoting not simply peace as the absence of war, but peace as the wholeness of a community living together in peace and justice. Salvation

²²⁷ May, *Children Matter*, 51.

²²⁸ Yust *Toddler Spiritual Formation*, 143.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Fox, *Original Blessing*, 51.

is never only an individual affair in the Hebrew Bible.”²³¹ Church families have an important role in helping families nurture their child’s spirituality.

Bible

Looking to the creation story in Genesis, Jensen noted in his preface, “God is the God of all creation, and names children as God’s own. To pay attention to this God is to pay attention to the faces of children who surround us.”²³² This was the responsibility of the church family. “Tell your children of it, and let our children tell their children, and their children another generation.” (Joel 1:3) The church family was given the responsibility of passing on the stories of faith from generation to generation.

Stories in the Bible teach the importance of relying on each other in the faith community. The authors of *Children Matter* pointed to these Old Testament stories in which the faith community was critical to the spiritual nurture of children. The story of the altar on Mount Ebal, (Joshua 8:30-35), where Joshua was with the faith community, the Israelites, sharing in elements of worship that included sacrifice, sharing God’s word through the law of Moses, and blessing. This experience included everyone. “There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the aliens who resided among them.” (Joshua 8:35) In Second Chronicles chapter twenty, Jehoshaphat stood among the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem and called upon God for help “. . . all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children.” (Second

²³¹ Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, 178.

²³² Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, xiii.

Chronicles 20:13); Nehemiah 12:27-43 brought the story about the dedication of the walls. “They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.” (Nehemiah 12:43) These authors showed how the faith community was important to Jesus. “Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover.” (Luke 2:41).²³³

“In Mark’s gospel, children appear as persons who embody the reign of God in being healed, blessed, lifted up, and restored by Jesus.”²³⁴ “For Mark, children and childhood are gifts from God not because they are carefree, but because God has a purpose for children. God gives children to the church and the world so that God may be known.”²³⁵ “Jesus took the time to hold the children in his arms, lay hands on them, and bless them. (Mark 10:16) He gave the children personal moments with himself. Probably many did not understand the words of the blessing, but they could understand the love communicated through the touch and the smiling eyes of Jesus.”²³⁶

Three different gospels noted the hospitality Jesus extended to children. (Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14; and Luke 18:16) “Children were invited to ‘come and see,’ to experience Jesus. As they spent time with him, they got to know and love Jesus.”²³⁷ “But

²³³ May, *Children Matter*, 130.

²³⁴ Mercer, *Welcome Children*, 66.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 34.

²³⁷ May, *Children Matter*, 51.

Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs’.” (Matt. 19:14)

Jesus modeled the need for retreat, a quiet time to reflect and commune with God. He retreated after much teaching and prepared himself for what would come next. (Matthew 14: 13) Jesus went to the Garden to pray in a time of trial. (Matthew 26:36) This quiet reflection is rarely incorporated in children’s education, but children hunger for it without naming it.

Carving out space in our activity-filled lives to be alone with God is a vital ingredient of the Christ-following life. In spite of the enormous demands made on him, Jesus’ life is punctuated with such spaces: retreating for forty days into the silence of the desert; spending a night alone before selecting his twelve companions; withdrawing before sunrise to a solitary place following an exhausting day’s ministry; seeking the solitude of the Gethsemane garden before the Calvary victory. These moments of silence and solitude were the secret of his life.²³⁸

Walter Brueggemann proposed the need children have for knowing religious stories. “His writings on children’s spirituality counsel parents and religious leaders to see their nurturing task as helping children embrace the stories of their faith tradition so they can ‘affirm that this is *my* story about *me*, and it is *our* story about *us*’.”²³⁹ It is not too early to begin this task in the church nursery with toddlers. The assumption of the church family’s role in nurturing the child’s spirituality has two components: one of nurturing the child and one of nurturing the family. Stories throughout the Bible support this assumption.

²³⁸ Hudson, *Signposts to Spirituality*, 87.

²³⁹ Yust, *Real Kids Real Faith*, 42.

Additional Support for This Assumption

The responsibility of the church family includes fostering spirituality each time anyone gathers at church. The call of the church to make disciples does not exclude young children. Therefore, the more familiar a church family becomes with the ways the child learns the more opportunities there are for growing faithful adults.

Dr. Howard Gardner's theory on Multiple Intelligences²⁴⁰ suggests that the way people learn best comes through an avenue where the person has experienced the story or the subject. There are very few appropriate curriculum resources for toddlers. The United Methodist curriculum uses an ecumenical curriculum entitled *Toddlers and Twos*.²⁴¹ The age span, from twelve to thirty months, is too broad and does not include developmental charts to help the adult leader know which parts a toddler developmentally is able to do. A curriculum entitled *Radiant Baby*²⁴² by Gospel Publishing does include developmental helps but skipped the ages eighteen months to twenty-four months. A third curriculum written by Palma Smiley, *To Toddlers With Love*,²⁴³ offered activities to a wide age span of eighteen months to age three and one half.

This third assumption of the church family's role in nurturing the child and the family gained support from history regarding how children were taught in Sunday School, theologians raising the issues of baptismal vows and hospitality, and biblically

²⁴⁰ Silver, *So Each May Learn*, 6-7.

²⁴¹ *Toddler and Twos* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

²⁴² *Radiant Baby* (Springfield MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007).

²⁴³ Smiley, *To Toddlers With Love*.

how children were included in the church family. Lastly, there was a look at the few options available in Christian education for young children.

Conclusion

The development of a BBSN toddler class would be foundational in nurturing the spiritual journey with young children. An adult class based on the elements of BBSN provided families of infants and toddlers an understanding of a child's spirituality and the role of the family and church family. This support was provided to celebrate the gift of spirituality. "To not be concerned about spiritual formation during childhood is to ignore the very foundations of the spiritual life."²⁴⁴ When a child's spirituality was nurtured it spoke volumes of how the parents' valued their time with their child.

"People who care about the spiritual formation of children must be concerned about the spiritual formation of the parents and their finding a place in the faith community."²⁴⁵ If the focus on children's spirituality does not include both the family and church family a gap widens in the communication. Teachers, caregivers and parents, need to be unified for best results towards wholeness in the Christian education process. If any one of these groups are left out of the process they miss an opportune time in developing additional connections with God. "A concern for teaching the faith to our children must, therefore, involve nurturing the faith of the adults in the faith community."²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 21.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

The authors of *Children Matter* reviewed the words of Walter Wangerin from his book *The Orphean Passage*. Wangerin explained “. . . that the music for the dance with God is controlled by the environment – the home and the church. . . . if the child never hears names for God, the music dies early in the child’s life. If the child never hears stories of God, if the child never is able to retell those stories, or if he or she is not given opportunity to claim the story, the music dies.”²⁴⁷ Wangerin described a child’s experience with God as ‘faithing’ which began at conception. The imago Dei was already within the child.²⁴⁸ Adults who saw God within a child have experienced a piece of God’s kingdom.

“What helps children open up to God? What prevents or closes down an awareness of God?”²⁴⁹ Awareness of God is a spiritual connection which is different from gaining knowledge about God. Discovering the sacred environment and placing it where it is available may challenge churches, especially large or mega churches. These churches tend to entertain to help children have fun learning about God.

All three of the author’s assumptions support the basis for creating spirituality in the church nursery with toddlers, families and the church family. The next chapter proposed a model for the author’s act of ministry and research methods used.

²⁴⁷ May, *Children Matter*, 20.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁴⁹ Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 22.

CHAPTER FOUR - HYPOTHESIS

The spiritual brain developed long before the age of seven. Infant and Toddlers have an innate spirituality beginning at birth. The church family plays an important role in assisting parents in recognizing, and further developing the child's spirituality. The key to enhancing spirituality comes through positive relationships created between child and parent as well as child-parent-church family. The development of a class for parents and caregivers strengthened the understanding of the child's spirituality, the role of spiritual parenting and the role of church family as a supportive entity affirming the child's spirituality. When the church family models the valuing of the infant and toddler, the whole family and the church family benefits. This benefit, when carried into the home of the parent-child and the church family, celebrated and affirmed the gifts of the child.

The project began shortly after the completion of renovating the infant and toddler classrooms. These rooms had little attention for the past fifty years. The next step was to address the need in developing a plan other than "just babysitting" children in the church nursery on Sunday mornings. The paid staff gave excellent care to the young children; but since many of the staff have a church home other than St. Luke's Church, their investment in the children's spiritual development seemed lacking. This scenario depicts

most church nurseries. The toddlers needed an opportunity to practice their faith in a space conducive for learning about God and with people who share God's stories.

Parents received notice that the combined toddler and two-year old class would split into two groups. Parental permission was granted to observe their child before the act of ministry began and four to six weeks during the act of ministry. A sign-in sheet, for the child's attendance and parent's permission, would be available at the greeting center of the nursery. See Appendix A This weekly practice of signing in occurred each Sunday during the act of ministry study. Fifteen toddlers between seventeen and twenty-four months participated.

A six-week class for toddlers tested their ability to participate in a model for Sunday School. The toddler classroom preparations included theme related toys and books placed on tables or floors where children could see them and feel invited to come in and explore. An outline, of the fifty-minute session included:

1. Arrival time and free time for play (20 minutes)
2. Circle time with story (10 minutes)
3. Worship time (5-10 minutes)
4. Feast (10 minutes)
5. Free play (5-10 min)

An Adult Class on Spirituality of Toddlers met for three weeks to discuss issues based around the author's three assumptions: 1) Children have an innate spirituality, 2) Families nurture their child's spirituality, and 3) The church family also nurtures by supporting families in the spiritual nurture of their children. Each week the author

addressed one of the assumptions. The author created handouts to share ideas and to gain information from the participants. See Appendix C

This project focused on toddlers and how the church offered a BBSN Sunday School that was more than “just babysitting.” Qualitative research included the author’s own experience and the experiences of multiple observers and parents. The toddler’s experience came out of the observations of the adults as they interpreted how the toddler responded through actions, play and a small amount of verbal language.

Interviews and surveys conducted before and at the end of the project gave a qualitative view of two types of Sunday School experiences for toddlers. Analyzed qualitative research in the form of narrative offered information which the author coded. This coded information focused on elements of BBSN and the interpreted narratives from parents’ observations. See Appendix D

Observers wrote narratives of what they discovered in the nursery class. Different observers, over a period of four weeks, observed the toddler class prior to the project. Other observers sat in on the act of ministry project with toddlers and observed another four weeks. Both groups of observers shared their narratives of the church nursery. See Appendix B

Qualitative research methods included observers who noted children’s activity and interaction in the classroom both before and during the act of ministry project. A survey presented to parents asked for their understanding of blessing based spiritual nurture concepts. Parents shared in interviews and surveys stories of their children’s participation in some of the blessing based spiritual nurture word list, their observations of the environment, their child’s experience in Sunday School and their family’s

experience with the Sacred Space Box. The author's personal journaling of the project, in narrative form, added insight as well. Coded data gave comparisons and insights that surfaced from narratives. See Appendix F

The means of measuring qualitative results included:

1. physical environmental changes and how children and adults received a new environment
2. curriculum development
3. adult leaders changing their approach in teaching and caring for children
4. families that chose to participate in the project and the effects beyond church into their home life.

In this qualitative research, the use of triangulation gave credibility to the author's work. Two forms of triangulation, data triangulation and investigator triangulation were used. Data triangulation analyzed words related to the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture through the surveys of parents in the toddler class and the adults who participated in the Toddler Spirituality class. Investigator triangulation, involved the Context Associates who assisted with their assessment of data collected.

Context Associates included three mothers of young children. All three stay home to raise their children. Their previous careers included one who worked part-time in Children's ministries; one who completed her Master's of Divinity and another who taught in the elementary public school setting. Other Context Associates included a father, with two young children, with a career in engineering and a retired public elementary school teacher.

The following chapter described the act of ministry. Two avenues of the project included a Sunday School class for toddlers, ages eighteen months to twenty-four months and the development of an adult class which focused on a toddler's spirituality.

CHAPTER FIVE - FIELD EXPERIENCE

The proposed act of ministry focused on families with toddlers. This included a six-week Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture Sunday School class for eighteen to twenty-four month old children. It also included a one-hour class session, for three weeks, in which parents of infants and toddlers discovered together:

1. The blessings of parenting and the spirituality of their infant/toddler.
2. The ways to create a faithful foundation for their family which nurtures the spirituality of their child.
3. The importance and enrichment of claiming the spirituality of each person at every age-level.
4. Naming ways the church family nurtures the faith of families with young children.

This act of ministry utilized a Sunday School class model for children ages eighteen to twenty-four months, incorporating elements of BBSN. The data collection methods included multiple class observers, the physical appearance and age-appropriateness of furniture and toys, curriculum and relationships between adults and children. Observers attended the toddler class sessions on Sunday mornings. Observations began before the six-week project to compare the different class styles. Interviews of parents, regarding their understanding of words foundational to this act of ministry, provided the author a tool of reference when speaking to families about BBSN church nursery. Interviews of parents gave reasons for their child's attendance in the church nursery.

A second part of the act of ministry involved an adult class on the spirituality of children. The three-week class consisted of four sets of parents, one grandparent, four mothers without their spouse, one single mom, and one church member interested in working with toddlers in the church nursery. The class introduced these adults to the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture concepts and the authors' assumptions that children have an innate spirituality. The role of parents, caregivers and the church family each play a role in nurturing the child's faith. The data collection for this group included the author's notes from discussions in class, individual interviews with parents regarding their understanding of various BBSN terms and class members' observations of their child when using "The Sacred Space Box." See Appendix D and F

Prior to the Act of Ministry

A welcoming room was prepared seven months prior to the actual project. An inviting spacious area with softly painted pink and yellow striped walls and free hand drawings of flowers gave happiness and whimsy to the room. The pink flowered curtain framed the front window. A beautiful wood floor, with its cream-colored area rug, created an atmosphere much like a home.



Fig. 4 Toddler Class Room (Photo by Author)

A child-size kitchen and table with tiny chairs anticipated the arrival of the young students. Inside the room, were two very small toilets with a half-wall which offered privacy, yet allowed the teacher to observe everyone in the room. The teacher's area incorporated above and below cabinet storage, sink, and changing area with steps for the child to climb into place for changing. This shared space, with the day care center, provided cubbies for day care children's things. A rolled-down door hid the unsightly clutter on Sundays making it a most inviting room.

Parents gave permission, for the observation of their child, by signing in before entry into the classroom. A total of fifteen children participated with an average attendance of nine. Parents received a list of words related to BBSN and wrote their understanding of the terms. Five parents responded to the word list.

Interviews offered parents a chance to express their reason for bringing their child to the church nursery and their vision of the ideal church nursery. Four parents responded. Two of the four responses came from parents whose child attended the toddler class. In summary, parents said they brought their child to the nursery because the nursery provided fun and safety while parents could focus on Sunday School and worship. Parents believed their child would not be able to sit still in worship. One parent commented that this fellowship with peers made one a better mother, wife, and friend. Some considered this time as a family experience. The whole family came to church rather than a parent staying home with a young child. The nursery provided the one thing that week that the family did together. One parent commented that attending the church nursery Sunday School created a "habit" early. This habit would last throughout the child's life due to the good memories, friends, and support. It created connections with

many people, across the United States, by providing basic knowledge of the Bible and building a foundation for the child to choose their own denomination.

The second question asked parents to describe the ideal church nursery. Parents described a place where the child could experience a home environment. This would be a safe place that where children would have fun with age-appropriate toys, books, and playground. One parent desired a balance of educational, spiritual education and play. The ideal staff and volunteers would consistently be in the room to greet children at the door, treat them with love, and teach them a brief lesson about God. The teachers would be educated in the church's ideals so they could offer an introduction to a Christian life. The rooms would have stations of different interests similar to the methods of Montessori. Parent notes sent home would indicate what the child did during their time in class such as lessons, snack offered, parenting tips that promoted the child's spiritual, emotional and physical growth. Parents dreamed of an efficient check-in process that allowed them to check-in their child so the parent could quickly get to their class.

Before this act of ministry began, there was a wide age span among the children in class. The youngest child was approximately twelve-months and the oldest thirty-months. The context associates and other church members observed the class four weeks before the act of ministry. They noted that the space was very inviting, clean, neat, and colorful with age appropriate furnishings. The staff person greeted many at the door as they left their child. Children's names were placed on their back so they could be identified. The adults called the children by name. It was not mentioned whether the adults actually knew the child's name or if they were reading the tag.

Observers noted that parents seemed comfortable leaving their children. The staff answered parents' questions promptly and then instructed parents on what to do with their child's belongings. Sometimes a younger child would have separation anxiety. If the staff was unable to calm down the child after fifteen minutes then they paged the parent. Some children played at the table with toys. An observer shared her experience that began with a child "up-chucking," which required more adult "hands" in the cleaning up process and disinfecting. At this point, there was only one toddler in the room and the rest were older. The toddler played well with the older kids at the table.

The children all seemed very comfortable with the adult staff person in charge and comfortable with each other. As time passed, more kids came into the room. The staff persons managed the room and checked diapers on a schedule. Adults were quite attentive to diaper changes. However, they wore the same pair of gloves to change all children. The adult changing diapers did wash her hands in between diaper changes and cleaned the changing table after each child.

The combined class of toddlers and two-year-olds kept everyone busy. Once when enough volunteers arrived, the toddlers were taken to another room. Adults kept children engaged in play, and most of the children were content to play with objects of interest on their own. They were not especially sociable with other children.

Another observer shared her insight that by the time everyone was present there were fifteen children and only four or five of these children could be classified as toddlers. The group continued to grow and the regular attendees seemed fairly comfortable with the staff and each other. However, some of the newcomers were fairly nervous and had trouble engaging or finding activities in which they wanted to

participate. There were too many children of too many different ages to engage the toddlers. The children did a lot of parallel play and were engaged with toys. The teachers interacted with the children and facilitated group conversations. They read stories aloud. One child was quite upset and after attempts to calm her and her parent was paged. The overall impression of the class was the teachers were doing a great job! Children are in good care.

On this particular Sunday, the observer noted how a mother volunteered to stay and read and sing to the children. The children were drawn to the book corner where this mother sat. It helped when the toddlers were removed. It seemed that when one child cried, others who otherwise had been content, started to cry. The book corner continued to attract more children. At one point, an older child requested to play "Ring around the Rosie" and all but one child played. In doing so, they learned about "rules" and being more group-oriented. The observer thought that the children enjoyed the group activity. The game lasted three rounds and then the children's interest went to individual interests in toys and climbing.

One Sunday, the teachers told the observer, they did not receive a lesson plan, so there was not a formal activity for the children. The teacher also noticed the children's Bible was missing. There was not any plan in place for the morning, but children seemed to play happily in the room. On days when the attendance was smaller it was much easier to keep children happy.

Only one week out of the four weeks observed had any type of lesson. The observer for that day noted that the lesson did not get started for quite awhile and some of the children seemed to be very nervous, especially the younger ones and the newcomers.

There was a lot of chaos at the beginning and the end of the lesson. The staff person gathered the children on a mat. She passed around a small lamb and allowed each of the children, who wanted to participate, to hug the lamb. She told them God loved them and said a prayer. The ritual of the lamb helped to engage the children, but once that was over the children became very distracted. The observer said what stood out, in this observation, was that rituals work. The children were engaged with the lamb exercise because it was familiar to them and each person had a turn. She the teacher led the song “Jesus Loves Me” and read the story of Hannah’s Prayer from a children’s Bible. The staff person asked the children what they prayed for and a few answered. The children had the opportunity to go to the tables and color. There was no distinct end to the lesson and not enough coloring sheets for all the children. Towards the end, the children received a snack at the table. Afterwards, most children played contently by themselves.

The Six-Week Act of Ministry

Sunday arrived and the lead teacher had prepared the lesson and the room. The lesson plan would be the same for six weeks. See Appendix E Pre-school Christmas music welcomed toddlers. Their eyes were drawn to a child-size table with three or four Christmas board books about Jesus’ birth, a four-piece nativity puzzle and a big book about Jesus birth. On another table sat a crèche made just for little children to touch and explore. The crèche was the primary focus in the room. An area rug provided a comfortable place to sit on the floor next to the crèche. A medium sized, soft, squeezable lamb sat on the floor. Halos and angel wings, for dress-up, were on the toy shelf. Other pull toys and musical toys filled the shelves. A kitchen, with all its utensils, was in the

corner of the room. Three adults, two of which were volunteers and one paid nursery staff, eagerly waited for the arrival of their tiny students.

The observer made notes of the morning. Parents began to arrive at 9:40 A.M. with their seventeen to twenty-four month old children. The adult leaders greeted the children and their parents. Parents hung diaper bags and coats on hooks while the leaders encouraged the children to explore the books or the crèche. Some children clung to mom or dad. Alex cried and held on tight to one adult leader the entire class time, while other children walked right in without any trouble. One or two children shed a few tears, for a brief moment, until an adult leader began moving their attention to the lamb and other items in the room. The lead teacher showed twenty-one month old Ella the wings and halo. Ella wore the halo and wings and said “pretty”! She wore them the entire class time.

Children played freely alone or with adults. Some enjoyed the kitchen while others pulled out toys from the day care shelves. The lead teacher sat near the crèche to play with children as they came to explore the contents in the stable.

After twenty-minutes of adults and children playing and exploring together, the lead teacher moved everyone to circle time. Adults picked up children and carried them to the carpet or held their hand and led them to the circle. Everyone sat in a clumpy type of circle near the table with the crèche. The lead teacher placed a purple cloth on the floor. Next she placed a small battery operated candle, a small soft white lamb and a blessing stick, typically known as flavored chap stick. The lead teacher picked up the soft little lamb, hugged it and said, “God loves Miss Charlotte,” and she hugged the little lamb. Then she said, “I am going to pass it to my next friend.” Mary hugged the lamb and with encouragement passed it to the next friend. This continued, with the help of the

other adults in the room, until all nine children had a chance to give the lamb a hug.

Three children moved from toy to toy and continued to play in other places in the room.

The lead teacher told the story about Jesus' birth using the figures in the crèche. At first, the children reached for the pieces, but the lead teacher asked them to wait and hear a story. The other adults in the room helped them to get ready to listen. The lead teacher began, "This is the mommy, and her name is Mary. This is the daddy, and his name is Joseph. Here is the baby Jesus. Here is the angel. Here is the cow. Here is the sheep, and here is the donkey."

Most children watched intently and listened, but a few children were busy elsewhere in the room. The lead teacher told the story again. She encouraged the children to participate in the story as she asked them to identify the characters in the story.

"Where's the mommy?" A child pointed to Mary. "Where's the baby?" A child pointed to the baby. "What does the sheep say?" A child said, "Baa-baa." "What does the cow say?" and a child responded "Moo."

The leader pulled out a big book of Jesus' birth and turned to only one page. It was the page with the nativity, and the children heard the story a third time. "Here's the mommy. Here is the daddy. Here is the baby. Here is the angel. Here is the cow. Here is the sheep. Here is the donkey. What does the sheep say? Where's the baby?" Children responded to each question. Then the leader sang a song to the tune of "The Wheels on the Bus."

The mommy in the stable goes rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye,
The mommy in the stable goes rock-a-bye all through the night.
The cow in the stable goes moo, moo, moo . . .
The daddy in the stable goes shh, shh, shh . . .
The baby in the stable goes wah-wah-wah . . .
The sheep in the stable go baa-baa-baa . . .

The first time this song was sung, the children watched the adults sing. The second time the song was sung a few children said “moo-moo-moo.”

The leader closed the circle time with a blessing and an echo prayer. The leader took the blessing stick and drew the sign of a cross on the back of each child’s hand. Most children allowed the leader to take their hand. One sat in mom’s lap and the leader shared God’s blessing with the mom, but her son was not ready. The other three children who were busy around the room missed the blessing.



Fig. 5. Blessing (Photo by Craig Teel)

The leader began an echo prayer with the intention that the children would repeat after the leader. The leader showed her hands, in a prayerful position, and asked to see their praying hands. Not all were ready with praying hands, but the leader began and the other adults echoed, “Dear God, (Dear God,) Thank you (Thank you) for (for) today (today). Amen (Amen).” Only the adults in the room echoed the prayer.

Next came the holy meal often called snack time. Adults moved the children toward the table where the children sat in the little chairs. Everyone came to the table, even if it was just for a moment. Children received cups while one of the adults dropped animal cookies into their cup. The children began to eat. The lead teacher jumped quickly

to her feet remembering to say another echo prayer to thank God. “Dear God (Dear God) thank you (thank you) for (for) our (our) food (food). Amen” (Amen). Again, the adults repeated the echo prayer. After the meal came clean up time and time to get ready for parents and grandparents to come.

The second week of the project found children more comfortable and fewer tears. This week a male volunteer joined the group. Ella came in and immediately went to the halo and wings, put them on and wore them the entire class time again. One little tearful boy stayed close to mom and mom finally took him home. Mom said he did not get much sleep and needed to take a nap. One active little boy, who did not sit during circle time last week, sat in the lap of the male volunteer who interacted with him. Circle time took all the adults to gather the children and join the circle cluster. The children actually sat and their attention spans grew a bit longer. The male volunteer kept an active child engaged during circle time. The lamb was passed to all who would give the lamb a hug. A few children were not able to stay through the whole circle time and played in other parts of the room. Henry, a Downs Syndrome child, seemed content sitting on a cushion with a nativity board book.

The lead teacher told the same Christmas story with the same crèche pieces. The children heard the same questions asked. Two or three children answered the questions “What does a cow say? What does a baby say?” The children spoke saying the sounds of a cow and a baby. The lead teacher showed the page, in the big book, and children identified the mommy, daddy, baby, angel, cow, donkey and sheep by pointing to them. The adults sang the song and several children sang “moo.” One child put a finger to his lips for “shh,” and a couple of children said “baa.”

God's blessing was shared with those sitting in the cluster. A few children continued their exploring in the room. The lead teacher led the same echo prayer and a few children echoed amen. The holy meal was accidentally left out which left more free time with adults and children playing together on the floor.

The third week kept the same items and the same plan for the class schedule. The children seemed to understand the routine. They knew the adults and other children, they knew about circle time, blessing, prayer, and a holy meal. The leaders had established a ritual for their time together.

The observer noted that when the male volunteer was not present it made a difference with the little one who needed him to help him pay attention. Most children gathered in the cluster to hear the story, see the pictures and identify objects. As the leader prepared the holy space with cloth, candle, lamb and blessing stick, Twenty-two month old Mary picked up the candle and carefully held it during the entire circle time. Each time she attempted to remove the candle from its holder the lead teacher gently replaced it and reminded her to hold the candle. The lamb was passed and a few children chose not to hug the lamb, so it was passed to the next friend.

When it was time to share God's blessing, Ella, with dark baby fine curls, was the first one to stand up and put out her hand. Then she put out the other hand. She attempted to take the blessing stick, but the lead teacher moved to the next child and shared God's blessing. Most children received a blessing, but a couple were shy and did not want the lead teacher to hold their hand.

The fourth week stayed the same. The room preparation and the schedule were the same. This time, no one cried! All the children present had been in attendance at least two

times. It was a snowy, icy day, and the lead teacher brought to class a new board book about creation. Only two pages were used which showed a picture of the sun and another picture of the moon and stars. The lead teacher prepared the holy space for circle time. She laid out the cloth, a candle, a lamb and a blessing stick. This time all the children came, and the adults helped them sit in the circle cluster. Ella picked up the blessing stick. The lead teacher gently took it from her and placed it on the sacred space cloth and asked her to wait. Everyone hugged the lamb. The lead teacher told the story about what God made. She then asked them to identify items, "Where's the sun?" Two children pointed to the sun. "Where's the moon?" Children pointed to the moon. "Where are the stars?" Again, children pointed to the stars, and then the lead teacher helped them count the stars one through six. The lead teacher said, "Let's share God's blessing." Ella stood up first, looked the lead teacher in the eye and put out her hand. The teacher drew a cross on the back of her hand and said the blessing. Ella put out her other hand and the leader gave her another blessing. Ella took the blessing stick from the teacher and went to each person, saying their name and making a mark on the back of their hand. The lead teacher followed her trying to say a bit of the blessing before Ella moved to the next person. Everyone received a blessing. It was not time for the echo prayer. "Dear God," (several said "Dear God") "thank you" (little voices echoed "thank you") "for" (adult voices were audible) "today" (adult voices were audible). "Amen." (Many little voices echoed "amen!")

The time came for the holy meal. All children moved to the table. Each received a napkin. The lead teacher led an echo prayer of thanks for the cookies. Some children repeated the word "cookies." Today, the lead teacher attempted a craft project. Due to

bad weather, there were only six children present an opportune time to try something new. The lead teacher placed six sheets of white construction paper and a tub of foam snowflakes on the table. She showed them the snowflakes and said, "God made snowflakes. Let's make a picture." The phrase "God made snowflakes" was written on the top of each sheet of paper. The lead teacher took a glue stick and placed a dot of glue, added a snowflake and patted the snowflake into the glue to make sure it adhered. The children all picked out snowflakes and patted them all on one paper. It became a group project without any glue! The lead teacher tried to put glue down and move their snowflakes to a glue spot as fast as possible. The class ended with six group projects, one for each child to take home.

Week five found the classroom prepared with the same room arrangement. Ten children attended Sunday School. The lead teacher was detained, but came into the room greeted by Ella. The lead teacher mingled and played with the children and called them by name without looking at their name tag. Soon it was circle time. The lead teacher took out of the cabinet the box with the crèche. Ella helped arrange everything on the purple cloth while the lead teacher put out the little lamb, candle and blessing stick. Eight children surrounded the area. Henry sat in a large soft play toy with Adam who had just learned to walk. Ella reached for the blessing stick, but the teacher gently put it back and asked her to wait. The lead teacher reviewed the characters in the birth story and then sang the nativity song to the familiar tune of "The Wheels On The Bus." A few children did the motions to the song and attempted to sing words. The lead teacher showed them the creation story of the sun, moon and stars and reviewed that story plus another song. The children watched the adults as they sang the new song. Ella moved close to the lead

teacher to receive God's blessing first. The other children and adults shared in the blessing. It was time for an echo prayer. Some of the children responded to the leader when asked to show their praying hands. Ella echoed the words "God," "today" and a few other children joined her on "amen"!

When it was time for the holy meal everyone came to the table. The adults helped to get enough chairs while the lead teacher carried Henry and placed him in a chair at the table with the group. The lead teacher sang an echo song for the grace and children listened. The children ate and then played until parents arrived.

Week six and the room remained prepared the same. Today, the lead teacher worked with the abstract concept that God loves you. The lead teacher adhered to the same schedule and included a craft. The lead teacher brought each child a paper with the words "God loves (their name)" and let the children stamp heart shapes. When finished, the children stayed to stamp more or moved about the room to play. While the children continued to stamp or play in the room, the lead teacher sang a song to them, "God loves (child's name) Yes, God does. Yes, God does. God loves (child's name), God loves (child's name) Yes, God does. Yes, God does." It was amazing! When each child heard their name they stopped whatever they were doing and turned to face the lead teacher. A big glowing smile came across each child's face as they heard their name called. Their attention remained on the lead teacher until the end of the song. Then the children came to the table for their holy meal and afterward played freely until parents and grandparents arrived.

Observations of The Act of Ministry

Different observers sat in on the toddler class. They commented that all the adults knew the children's names. Again, it was not stated whether adults knew the child's name or if they were reading the tag. When a new child entered the room, an adult stayed with them to get them acclimated to the room. Adults took tearful children immediately and diverted their attention to play things which assured parents their child would be fine. After three to four consistent weeks of attending class the tears ceased. Teachers played with the children. One adult sat on the floor ready to play while another adult wore her wings and halo to greet children. Another adult held and talked to an upset little boy who settled down after about five minutes. The adults played with the pieces in the crèche and invited children to join them. Children sat in the laps of the adult to have the Christmas board books read to them.

The first week, Chris missed mommy, and the volunteer, who was a mother of one of the toddlers, walked around pointing out things for Chris to see. Soon a jealous son saw mom with another child, and she carried both boys. Observers discovered that after about ten minutes most children were comfortable enough to separate from the teachers and play independently. There was a lot of play time with toys that related to the lesson and toys in general. Adults made sure all children were included in an activity.

Each week at approximately 10:00 A.M. story time began. This particular day, all the adults sat on the floor to help children listen to the story. Alex seemed unsure of where to go and stayed close to an adult. The lead teacher drew the children's attention with the wood block instrument making the sound of a donkey's clippity-clop. She then

told the story using the pieces of the nativity. The adults sang the song while children watched and listened. The children were focused and attentive to the story. One child was not in the circle at all, but played quietly in the room. Another child, on the periphery of the circle, stood listening and then wandered away. Observers commented how they thought it was good that the children were not forced to come to the circle. One observer noted that as the child matures they will join the circle, and it will be a time of praise!

An observer wrote about how teachers affirmed and validated children. The lesson contained lots of identifying of objects and children received praise as they named each one. A few children dressed up with angel wings and the lead teacher helped them identify angels in nativity books. The adults walked around the room and got on the children's levels to talk with them. They went to each child and made sure not to leave out anyone. When a child tried on a halo, observers noted how the child seemed joyful as adults affirmed them. Even the adult male was affirmed as he wore his halo.

One observed noted how the sacredness of a cloth and candle made circle time special. Another observer identified the learning goal was to be acquainted with the nativity. It was a nativity set the children could touch and handle. Another observer named the objectives for the lesson which appeared to be identifying characters, knowing about baby Jesus and the angel.

One week, Alex cried most of the time which required an adult to care for her all during class. The observer thought she was teething. Observers, each week, watched the children gather around the sacred space as the teacher prepared it with the cloth and

other items. Everyone seemed to love the little lamb. It was a validation of God's love for each child. The children loved the song with all the animal sounds. This was another reinforcement of the story.

One observer watched as adults read to children. Timid children sat in the laps of adults and listened to the story. When the story ended, children stayed seated in laps and started playing quietly with nearby toys. When Ella noticed her wings had fallen off she jumped up and struggled to get them back on with the help of an adult.

An observer was surprised at the children's very short attention spans and saw the need for lots of toys; but the observer also noted that the children often returned to the area rug with the table and crèche. After the first week, most children gathered with anticipation and eagerly put on wings and halos. It seemed that the children enjoyed their class.

Blessing time was led by the lead teacher who placed the sign of a cross on the back of each person's hand with chapstick that smelled sweet. She said a short blessing and encouraged the children to smell it. On one occasion the blessing was shared while the children were moving in their perpetual motion.

It was 10:18 A.M. when snack time began. Most children quietly and quickly followed adults to the snack table. Adults interacted with children, at the table, while eating. As children got up from the table to go play, adults interacted with them in whatever activity they chose. One or two children looked for a specific adult to play with them.

One of the volunteer class leaders offered this observation: "Adults listened, anticipated and explained to children with patience and love and for the moment, were

completely oblivious to worries and woes of daily life, concentrated solely on the children. Little ones were willing to accept who they were and not demand any special treatment. The special child, Henry, asked nothing and gave special attention to the lead teacher who gave him attention.”

In addition to the observations made by volunteers assisting with this project, the author made observations from the experience and kept a journal. The project introduced adults to the process of working with toddlers using concepts for BBSN. Everyday toys became spiritual toys which enhanced the lesson.

This was definitely a time for women to wear pants. During the entire project not one diaper was changed and parents did not complain. It was also interesting that no parents were paged due to a child in distress.

Adults and children were building relationships throughout the morning. Ella expressed her faith as she ran to get the halo and wings every Sunday. Many children had difficulty placing hands together for prayer, but adults helped them. Each week a few children moved about the room during circle and prayer time. The freedom exhibited their focus on themselves, but as weeks passed, some joined the circle even if for a short time. This action showed the child was maturing and beginning to think beyond themselves to a community.

It took only two weeks before most children sat through the entire circle time. One of the boys bonded with the male volunteer. When the volunteer was not present it made a difference. Although the child was non-verbal he missed his adult friend. Sometimes adults forget the importance of their presence. Some children may not have a father figure in the home and would enjoy the attention from the male teacher.

Children became more comfortable in answering the same repeated questions from previous weeks. It was amazing how children knew the class routine. Circle time, blessing, prayer and the holy meal moved smoother as adults and children became familiar with the schedule. They established a ritual for their time together. They seemed to be gaining an understanding of the sacred space created at circle time.

The last week, the lead teacher attempted working with the abstract concept “God loves you.” She used a heart stamp for a craft project knowing the children would enjoy stamping. The discovery was the community these children perceived as they created their artwork. The children do not have ownership of their art, but together played with the art materials. Another surprise came as the lead teacher sang “God loves (name).” As soon as the child heard their name they stopped what they were doing, turned and faced the teacher. A smile, from ear to ear, came over their face and they gave the teacher their complete attention until the end of the song. This was a very heart-warming experience for the lead teacher.

The lead teacher taught a few weeks beyond the scheduled act of ministry and discovered one other thing. The new curriculum focused on communion for the month. The lead teacher was unable to be in the class the first Sunday it was presented, so the paid staff person taught the lesson. The next week the lead teacher taught the same exact lesson. The volunteer, who wrote the curriculum, suggested the children eat French bread for their holy meal. Since the story was about Jesus eating with his friends, the lead teacher took the loaf of bread, broke it, and told the children sitting in the clumpy circle that Jesus shared food with his friends. She pinched off a piece and a child came to her and took it. Other children followed. They all returned for seconds, thirds and fourths

They ate the bread! The paid staff person then told the lead teacher that the children did not like the bread last week and did not eat at their designated holy meal. The lead teacher taught the lesson unknown to the fact that the children did not like the bread. What was the difference? Was it because it was bread at the holy meal table and not the routine animal cookie? It could have been. The author chose to think it was the experience of the story told around the sacred space. It was a Jesus experience of people hungering for more and trusting to come and take a piece. What a humbling place for a teacher.

Ritual, presentation of the story, freedom to choose as the child matures and positive attitudes nurtured children and adults. Children and adults are shaped by the experience. More will be said in chapter six regarding reflections on this act of ministry.

An Adult Class on Toddler Spirituality

A three-week class on spirituality of infants and toddlers offered parents and care-givers the opportunity to grow in their awareness of a very young child's ability to share their faith and grow in their faith. Twenty-two people enrolled in the class with an average attendance of twelve. Each week, the class focused on one of the author's assumptions:

1. Session One - Children have an innate spirituality which they express in ways different from adults. They model for us a way of life in God's kingdom.
2. Session Two - Families nurture a child's spirituality.
3. Session Three - The church family supports families in nurturing and blessing one another.

Session one spoke of valuing the spirituality of the young child through the Three R's—Relationships, Ritual, and Religious language. The leader welcomed the adults into a room arranged with tables and chairs in a circle. On the tables were folders with handouts. See Appendix C and G On the table, near the door, the members of the class found “Sacred Space” boxes and name badges prepared for each person. The worship center, placed in the middle of the circle, had a cloth-covered table with a ceramic hand holding an infant. The leader informed the group of the author's project on young children's spirituality and invited their permission for sharing their experiences and ideas in the project. The leader then asked everyone to share their name and reason for attending the class.

The leader compared early theologians and early developmental theories with current theories and studies regarding children's spirituality. The leader stated that children already have the gift of spirituality. Scripture pointed out Jesus' message to the disciples of allowing children to come and to be careful not to hinder their coming. Jesus referred to children as “Little ones who believe in me.” The disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus. In their thinking, the children were too immature, but instead Jesus embraced the children and blessed them, proclaiming children as the ones who possess and embody the kingdom of God. Jesus valued children. He came close to the ones thought to be invaluable to the kingdom or unworthy of taking his time.

The lead teacher referred to Maria Montessori who stated, “There is a four-year period of ‘potential’ growth, which is the most critical period of human development. This time is from conception until about the third birthday.”¹ The lead teacher challenged

¹ Porter, *Early Brain Development*.

the group to think about things learned during that period of time. The group named the following: learning to talk, walk, share toys, and listen. The class participants received developmental charts which gave insight to infants through age three.

The lead teacher reviewed information about Jewish families and how they understood their children as participants in God's covenant. She shared the visual reminders that were used by the people of Israel. The lead teacher then asked, "What are symbols in our homes today? What would remind your family of God?" Some shared they had a family Bible, others had a cross or crosses in visible areas of their home. The group discussed the difference between abstract and concrete ideas, then named concrete symbols of faith and how these symbols provided tools for families to begin dialoguing about faith. The group also recognized how symbols emphasized the importance of God's words. The leader shared that as families practice spirituality, those disciplines lay a foundation for their children.

Each member of the group received a "Sacred Space Box" to take home and begin a practice of worship. The plastic box contained a small stuffed lamb, a square felt cloth, a blessing stick (chap stick), and a battery operated candle in a holder.



Fig. 6. Sacred Space Box (Photo by Craig Teel)

The leader modeled a suggested way of using the items and encouraged the adults to practice at home and observe their child. The leader suggested the family practice using the materials once a day with their child.

The group had a brief discussion on toys and spiritual toys. The leader spoke of the importance of spiritual toys which could be any toy that pointed to religious language, such as a lamb. The leader asked the group to name how the lamb connected to scripture and faith. The group responded with, “Lamb of God,” “the good shepherd,” “the lost sheep,” and “the sacrificial lamb.” The leader commented how a common toy becomes spiritual in its use and as the child grows older the symbol takes on another level of meaning.

Session two emphasized the important role the family has in nurturing a child’s faith. The leader shared Walter Brueggemann’s idea “. . . our hope is that the child will – over time – affirm that this is my story about me, and it is our story about us.”² The leader, also, shared the importance of intentional and relational parenting of the child’s spirituality: affirming the child’s spirituality, but also asked the adults to practice intently on their own spiritual practices.

The leader posed the question “What do we model for our children who look to their primary caregiver for the best examples?” The leader reminded the group that the gift they have received in their child becomes the opportunity to model practices of spirituality which include prayer, study of God’s word and compassion for others. Another key practice mentioned was play. The leader encouraged adults to play with their child, not directing them, but following their imagination and creativity. When adults take time to be present to the child, the child knows they are valued and important. When

² Yust, *Toddlers Spiritual Formation*, 133.

adults listen to children with holy listening, they are genuinely present to the child.

Giving attention without giggling at the cuteness but truly affirming the deeper level of the child's sharing validates their spirituality.

The leader shared that a parent/caregiver personifies attributes of God, and children depend on their nurturing adult to know God. The leader told the members of the class, "You are God with skin on," and the way adults relate to the child influences the child's formation spiritually in positive or negative shaping.

The leader shared a learning of three points that adults with a mature faith attribute to their child's faith development:

1. Provide experiences for children to experience their parents' prayer life;
2. Allow children to talk about faith, ask questions and hear theological discussion at home;
3. Share compassion with others as servants to those in need.

Members of the class received a refrigerator magnet with these three points for families to remember.

The group brainstormed ideas for mission, prayer, and how to dialogue God's story. The leader passed around a variety of children's Bibles appropriate for young children and suggested to keep stories simple and look for simple pictures such as a sun, moon and stars or Jesus holding a child. The group remembered prayers including memorized prayers, their importance, their meaning and the positive and negative feelings from those prayers. Prayer practices suggested included simple one-sentence prayers, echo prayers, memorized prayers and more developed spoken prayers. The leader cautioned the group to avoid the tendency of molding children into what they

considered “the right answer” or “the right way to pray.” The leader and the group members suggested ideas for serving others: take cookies to eat with an elderly friend; shop for food to give to a food pantry; visit in a hospital, nursing home or the home of shut-ins; deliver meals to homebound; pick up trash in the neighborhood; or take daddy/mommy/granny a special snack.

The leader told the group that one-hour per week in Sunday School does not keep the religious memory alive. The parental role included reinforcement by reading to their child, interacting in their child’s play and talking about God, God’s people, and God’s creatures. The leader encouraged adults in the practice of spiritual disciplines, because it developed the religious language of God’s stories, music and rituals. The leader pointed out that the ability to understand a language formed long before a child would speak the language. As the child feels comfortable and familiar with the language they continue to grow through each developmental stage in their faith. They learn the language of religious symbol, ritual and tradition of their faith community. All words and symbols contribute to developing the child’s brain and their spirituality.

Music may be the first intelligence formed which emphasized the importance of hymns and other songs of faith. Babies listen to words and remember repeated patterns which give them comfort in knowing what to expect. Children who experience religious language and symbol develop their spiritual brains. What would happen if a child never heard names for God, was never able to retell stories of faith in their own way, or never had the opportunity to claim the story in their own child theology? The result produced would be adults challenged at calling on God when coping with difficult situations and discernment of Gods’ leading in their life.

The group discussion went in the direction of answers for the questions children ask about death, heaven, and hell. A lively and open discussion ensued. The leader affirmed the group's discussion and suggested to stay true to concrete and simple concepts when speaking with their child. Discussion of watching movies about Christ's passion moved the group to a discussion on appropriate age-level scenes for children.

The third session focused on the church family's responsibility to the family. The group reviewed the vows the church family made at the time of an infant's baptism. A discussion followed on the various methods of baptism and the United Methodist understanding of baptism.

The leader asked the families to share experiences from their practice with the "Sacred Space Box." Comments from parents who used "The Sacred Space Box" generally referred to it as the "prayer box." The leader asked for specific examples related to holy listening, ritual, blessing, religious language and prayer. See Appendix C and I

The parents of a twenty-four month old daughter shared how much their daughter loved her new "Sacred Space Box." She got very upset if the parents forgot to use the box at her bedtime routine. She also loved adding new things to the routine. She sat in moms' lap to pray and read her favorite book, "Dear God, Good night." Mom described her daughter clamping her hands together, but it does not last long. She wants to turn the pages in the book. On another occasion, mommy asked her daughter if she wanted to sing a song and she said "pray" and folded her hands.

This same mother told of an experience while driving the car. She heard her daughter talking in the backseat. Then she heard her say, "Amen." Grandmother was

sitting next to her. The mother asked the grandmother if the daughter was praying and grandmother responded “It looked like it.” Her hands were clasped together, and she prayed on her own with no encouragement from an adult.

The second couple told their story. The parents of a nineteen-month old son shared that he can do praying hands. He can set up the sacred space himself, too. Mom has been doing “The Sacred Space Box” with her son for a month. After bath time, his room was prepared. They pick up things, sit on the floor, place the cloth on the floor, turn on the candle and place it on the cloth. They set out the lamb, the blessing stick and his first Bible. They add a Lenten offering box for the season. They hugged the lamb and mom said, “God loves (name)”; they sang a song and said an echo prayer. Then mom did the blessing, with the sign of the cross, on his hand and said “God loves (name).”

The first time this family used “The Sacred Space Box” it was just the mom and her son. Then her son wanted daddy to do it. Sometimes baby brother became part of their time, and if aunts and cousins came to visit, he wanted them to join in the sacred time, too.

The third story came from a mother of a daughter age three. They used prayer beads to thank God. She prayed for one thing on each bead. Her daughter often said, “Thank you God, for my Princess Dora Fairytale Castle. Thank you, God, for everyone in the whole wide world.”

This mother also shared that her daughter loved her box and chose the box over her books before going to bed. Some days they did the prayer box two or three times. Her daughter took charge of setting up the space. She turned on the candle light (her favorite thing). They now have the prayer beads and a mini-library of Bible stories or church

related books. For a time it was important to her daughter that the books fit in the box. Now they have a library of various books, not in the box. The blessing stick was a favorite. Their daughter does the blessing on mom's hand first by drawing a big cross. She quickly picked up the wording, although it was sometimes out of order, but she always ended with "God is always with Mommy." Mom gave a blessing to the daughter with a big cross on the child's hand. Her daughter blessed baby brother, too. She liked the whole family to share in the "prayer box" time. When guests came to their home, they were invited to prayer time with the whole family.

The next mother has two boys, one age five and a Down Syndrome child age three. The mother and the three-year old said a one-sentence prayer each night before she put him in his crib. She said "amen" and the child put his head faced-down in his pillow. He then made a loud two or three syllable utterance after amen. Occasionally mom blessed the older son when she dropped him off for school. She would either draw a cross on his hand (with her finger) or just say, "God loves you." When she prayed with the older son they usually used his prayer beads or held his cross. He said prayers with the beads and then she said prayers with the beads.

The last parent, a mother of a two-year old daughter shared that she let her daughter play with "The Sacred Space Box." The mother felt she let her daughter treat it like a toy and it spoiled the holiness of "The Sacred Space Box." However, she also said their daughter now prayed before eating and the whole family was trying to say a prayer before each meal.

Conclusion

Qualitative research and analysis of data came out of two different types of toddler-class experiences on Sunday mornings. This author would classify one experience as loving childcare and the other experience a class based on the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture. Other qualitative research came from interviews of parents. This determined the parental understanding of what they expected from the church nursery, what they hoped for in a church nursery, how a parent noticed spirituality in their child and nurtured their child's faith.

Three parts rose out of this project: one, the actual development of a spiritual nurturing toddler class; two, an adult class on the spirituality of the young child; and three, the practice of families noticing God's work in their child and family through "The Sacred Space Box." Further reflections on these pieces follow in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX - REFLECTIONS, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

God's child came to the church nursery toddler class. Did the church family prepare for this child's coming? The author's own experience of taking her twenty-two month old child to the church nursery found it difficult to hand her baby to a girl who appeared no older than fourteen years of age. The adult was in the adjacent room caring for an infant. A door connected the two rooms so the adult could manage both the crib room and the babies and toddlers playing with the two teenage girls. Throughout the thirty years of this author's ministry what happened in the church nursery was low on the list of priorities. Even trained professional Christian educators do not receive training related to very young children. Someone was needed to advocate for young children unable to speak for themselves. This author wondered what a toddler class experience included to make it more than a time of babysitting and reflected on the act of ministry. Jesus said, "Let the little children come." (Mark 10: 14)

Sunday School, which consisted of childcare, made sense because toddlers have very little verbal skills in which to communicate with adults. Adults found it difficult to recognize and comprehend the language of toddlers and know the needs of biblical or spiritual curriculum for the class. How would Jesus lead these little ones in the toddler class? What this author discovered was the child, already part of the Kingdom of God, inevitably led the adult leader into God's kingdom with awe and wonder.

Parents hunger for adult relationships, adult discussions and a safe place for their children while attending church. Parents have made an assumption that the church family has someone in the nursery whose first priority would be to keep their child safe, second, to treasure their little gift and third, maybe prepare their child for receiving Christian education later down the road. What was not considered was the fact that the child would be ready to receive faith and share their faith now.

The author compared the church nursery toddler class prior to this project (a typical church nursery) and the act of ministry, which created a Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture toddler class. Both models of Sunday School had loving adults who knew the children's names and paid attention to them. The typical nursery model did not have a routine to the class with the exception of consistent diaper changes. A lesson was not always prepared. A too wide of an age span of young children caused chaos much of the time and tearful children. The BBSN toddler class teachers focused on a ritual for the morning. The age group was a narrower focus and adult leaders approached the morning with a attitude of sharing and playing God's story with the children. There were very few tears or diaper changes. The lesson outline followed closely to the outline for worship. The design of the BBSN lesson would aim at a purpose for each segment of the lesson. See Appendix E

Reflections on the Six-Week Act of Ministry

A beautifully decorated room with leaders happy to welcome parents and their children set the stage for this six-week act of ministry. Fifteen toddlers participated in the act of ministry with an average attendance of nine each Sunday. Parents left their young

children in a clean and safe environment, but curiously, only one parent inquired about curriculum or activities for their toddler. These eighteen to twenty-four month old children experienced a blessing based spiritual nurturing church nursery. The preparations for the class appeared easy and simple, but not last minute, which exhibited an intentional plan for the morning.

Surveys and interviews regarding the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture word list revealed that the parents had a variety of levels of understanding the terms. An interesting discovery was the understanding of spirituality. Parents could not easily identify spirituality in their child; however, many parents described experiences that pointed to spirituality.

The author reflected on the experience of each of the BBSN elements which included blessing, ritual, community, religious language, relationship, nurture, environment, hospitality, holy or sacred space, holy listening and curriculum. Another element surfaced that of modeling spiritual disciplines. Each are addressed throughout this act of ministry. These words have an important role in how connections are made with God and how God's people notice God's presence. These words are not listed in priority but are part of the greater picture towards wholeness.

Blessing

A blessing stick, a common item called chapstick, became holy because of its use. The respect of how to use the blessing stick and the special or sacred words used with the blessing stick communicated God's message. Over and over again Jesus used common symbols or everyday items to speak of God's love and a way of knowing God. Many

parables used common symbols as Jesus taught the people. The blessing stick would be the common symbol as well as the drawing. The symbol of the cross, drawn on the back of the hand, symbolized God's protection, as well as a reminder that all God's children follow the risen Christ. Toddlers would not recognize this concept, but perhaps if used consistently would gain a deeper meaning as their faith grew.

A young child shared a sweet witness of faith as the child reached out to receive the blessing on one hand and then reached with the other hand to receive additional blessings. The stated blessing words, "God created you, God loves you, God blesses you and God loves you (child's name) heard over and over gave a personal touch. This reminded everyone that God knows each person by name. The adult teacher spoke in a voice filled with genuine love that emulated God's spirit in the blessing. The child's face beamed and the presence of God blessed both child and adult. When longing to receive a blessing one must take a risk in putting themselves in the midst of God's people in whatever situation. God hopes for all God's children to give themselves to a place of blessing. The shared blessing blesses both the giver and the receiver.

The received blessing in return can be quite a surprise! A surprise this author experienced when a young child extended a hand without anyone asking! The child knew the blessing marked them with something that smelled good, and that they would receive a gentle touch from the one passing God's blessing to them. The adult passing the blessing truly received a blessing when the child's face glowed with a smile.

A bigger surprise came when another young child demonstrated the joy of sharing God's blessing with others. The young child, with few verbal skills, said the most important word, the person's name. The surprise came as the child made a mark and said

the other child's name! Not just for one child, but for all in the room. What would be the learning for adults? How wonderful to be marked by God and hear one's own name called by such an innocent and pure voice. This small voice invited one into a relationship with God.

The ritual of blessing gave an opportunity to look for and name blessings. Three-year old Lance came to chapel time. He knew the ritual, as he had experienced chapel time for seventeen months. The expectation was to share something happy or something sad when it came his turn to hold the little lamb. This day, Lance shared something happy and as the leader asked him to pass the lamb to his next friend Lance spoke up and said, "No, I have more blessings to share!" "A family living the covenant can come together and share joys and sorrows, triumphs and defeats because the family provides the support, acceptance and love to go again."¹ Lance trusted his Chapel time family and knew that he would receive support and love. He could put words to celebrate the joys God had given him!

On another occasion, twenty-month old Reese came to chapel time for the first time with his class, but he knew the ritual from his brief six-week experience in the toddler Sunday School class. Reese did not have verbal skills to communicate with the leader, but communicated by offering his hand to receive God's blessing as soon as he entered the chapel and saw the sacred space arranged on the floor.

Without acknowledging and celebrating blessing, one may overlook the goodness of life or apathy may reside in the place of blessing. The power of God's presence, in the act of blessing brings a oneness in relationship which leads leads to another level, a level

¹ Karan Marshall, *Living the Faith with Young Children* (Nashville: Graded Press Nashville, 1978), 21.

involving holy listening. A class full of blessing offered attitudes of praise and gratefulness.

Nurture

The thread that held all these words together was nurture. The care and feeding of a child's spirituality in any of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements came through the nurturing of family members and church members. Should the children not have experienced the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements the family and the church family would fail in the vows assumed at the child's baptism.

Church families along with the parents nurture the child's faith. This does not mean the church waits until the child has received their Bible in third grade. It begins at the birth of the child, but especially when the church family took vows at the time of Baptism.

The nurture of parents through a class helped parents discern their beliefs and values. They need a place to discern and voice the spiritual values they reflect to their children. The church nurtured parents in the practice of spiritual disciplines as they model their faith to their children. "Your behavior toward our child lays the foundation of trust in faith that later allows your child to understand and label concepts as his or her religious understanding develops."² The church has the opportunity to nurture the entire family in a way toward spiritual wholeness.

Not all nurture points to the goodness of God. This was learned early in this paper regarding Augustine's focus on original sin. Adults who reprimand a child because

² Delia Touchton Halverson, *Helping Your Child Discover Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1982), 20.

developmentally they are not ready must heed Jesus' warning, "... do not hinder them." If the church does not provide the best, the finest meal, then children hit roadblocks early in their spiritual journey.

Hospitality

Interviewed parents held in high regard the importance of consistent, welcoming faces, who met them at the doorway. A room that displayed plenty of age appropriate toys and books enticed families to bring their children. Hospitality radiated comfort both from the appearance of the room and the teachers' voices and actions. Hospitality is relational. The adults who played with children built relationships. These relationships extended into the church family and focused on children as a gift from God.

The adults received each family with a positive and uplifting spirit. The attractive and age-appropriate furniture in the room appealed to the families, but it was the teachers' attitude of welcoming the holy which contributed most to a hospitable environment. Children separated from their family and learned to trust the Sunday School teacher which helped children to develop trust in God now and in the future. While the parent was away, the teacher became an agent for God.

Families were reassured knowing the immediate attention and comfort that their child received in the toddler class. A sense of security with the same adult faces was important to both children and their families. As children became familiar with the people in the room and the Sunday morning ritual, there were fewer tears.

The attention from adults helped every child participate in the sacred circle time, the holy meal and free play. This holy listening attention engaged adults to focus on

children and notice the blessing in the moment. Circle time, made holy, gave a God-centered focus rather than a focus on the lead teacher trying to make learning happen. This holy time gave the leader freedom and allowed God to control the group's time together. This was a display of hospitality at its best!

Spirituality

Parents repeatedly responded, in interviews and surveys, that they were not able to identify their child's spirituality. The reason given was the child's inability to verbalize. Yet, their stories indicated the spirituality of their child. The best way to describe spirituality would be to "come and see." Come and see the nineteen-month old boy who folded his hands for prayer time. See him set up the sacred space all by himself. Watch the family worship with "The Sacred Space Box." Come and see whom the child invites to come and worship.

Three-year old, Andrew, a Down's Syndrome child, did not need words to express faith or prove his spirituality. The child responded to the moving of God's spirit. His mother's story of how she practiced the discipline of prayer. This discipline prepared her to receive and take notice of God's presence in her child with or without language. Come and see this child as he placed his head faced-down in his pillow, made a loud two or three-syllable utterance after mother said, "Amen." Who but God knows the level of spirituality of this child, but the mother's prayer life transcended to this child in a holy moment.

Come and see the child who shared her religious story as she wore the angel wings week after week. She did not need verbal skills to share her faith. She glowed with

joy each time she wore them. Come and see the child who prayed, "Dear God" and did not know any other words; yet, she would know God's positive spirit through the inflection of voices around her.

Other parents noted:

1. Their child could name the nativity pieces.
2. Their child who requested to hug the lamb received comfort.
3. The parent, while driving, heard the child refer to God in prayer.
4. The parent who recognized their uncertainty of the child's spiritual ability; yet trusted in God, practiced the discipline of ritual and expected their child to be open to spiritual experiences.

The author attributed the following personal experiences of noting children's spirituality:

1. The child repeated a word of religious connotation or said the word without prompting.
2. The child wanted everyone in the family to worship together as a community of faith.
3. The child respected the holiness of the sacred space items and gently held the candle, hugged the lamb, passed it to the next friend and used the blessing stick as directed.
4. The child demonstrated the eagerness of receiving a blessing and offering a blessing. Perhaps this was exactly what God hoped all God's children would do.

Did the volunteers and paid staff recognize the child's spirituality? Although there was not an interview with the paid staff nor did they respond to the questionnaires; whenever the lead teacher recognized spirituality with an uplifting facial expression or verbalized the surprise discovery, others verified what the lead teacher just experienced.

Adults assumed that the simple prayer, the simple action or the mimicking of another adult was not spirituality. Parents and other adults could not name the spirituality

in the child because it appeared trite. The value of taking a child's play as prayerful and spiritual was difficult for adults. Adults expect spiritual to mean deep reflection. Play and simplicity are the child's deep reflections and adults often miss the toddler's spirituality.

Ritual

Ritual developed structure and without it came chaos. Ritual offered calmness as the children and the adults new what to expect when they walked into the toddler class. The ritual gave a way of living and being with one another, not just at church, but at home, too. Using the same pattern of prayer offered a way for the child to remember. Rituals, because of their repetition, are remembered. Four-year old Sarah saw the candle and candle lighter on the table and asked for candle time as she recalled the goodness of the time spent with God, Nana and Sarah. Through the practice of ritual, children anticipate a holy time with God and with others. Jesus said, "Little ones believe in me," and because of the ritual of blessing a child taught how they do not hesitate to reach out for a blessing.

The importance of maintaining a ritual in class included learning through repetition. Ritual helped in setting expectations and boundaries. Repetition created habits. These habits changed behavior. Children were less fussy and adults knew the expectations for their role in the classroom. This made for an enjoyable time with God and each other.

Everyone heard the message over and over again that God creates, loves, blesses and is always with God's children. Repetition would give a tool for recall years later. A story from a Methodist pastor in the Oklahoma Conference told about a time he and his

friends were in World War II. The enemy captured and held them in a prison camp for several months. What sustained them was the recalling of scripture. Once they were released and back home, this pastor noted that those who recalled scripture recovered from the overall experience in much healthier ways than those who did not.

Symbol

Jesus used common images to move people to connect with God. The symbol of the little lamb offered love comfort and care. This image embedded in the memory can, when recalled, rescue a child or adult when faced with darkness in life. The symbol of a Good Shepherd leading God's children to places of safety and refreshment may play a significant role in leadership development and caring for others. As each person in the circle hugged the little lamb the memory of God's loving presence grows dearer. Growing up knowing God loves each person encourages positive self-esteem. Children observed other children hugging the lamb and heard words that God is with them, too. The sharing of the lamb, passed to another friend, became a teachable moment in the sharing of God's love. The symbols used in class reminded the adults and children of belonging to God and relating lovingly to each other and to God. The holy meal celebrated God's family, sharing life together and connecting with Jesus. Through symbol and ritual all God's children come to know the best ways to be with God.

The value of naming toys as spiritual toys helped adults to share God's story with everyday items. These pointed to meaning beyond itself and became symbols in religious language. The common toy became spiritual in its use. As the child grows older the symbol takes on another level of meaning. Spiritual toys helped children and adults in

spiritual or godly play. Toddlers, with their very short attention spans, required the availability of many toys, but it surprised the author how often the toddlers returned to the area rug with the table and crèche. The playing and working with spiritual toys nurtured the child's innate spirituality.

The child who chose a favorite bedtime book triggered a time for prayer. Prayer beads helped bring concreteness to abstract concepts for young children. These spiritual toys helped children spend more time connecting with God. The symbol of faith reminders, when missing, may lead to valuing the worldly rather than the godly. When the symbol of light was not visible, hope may dim in difficult times.

Religious Language

Jerome Berryman, theologian and Christian educator named "four kinds of meaning that religious language provides for children: parables, silence, sacred stories and liturgical acts."³ Toddlers are the language of parables, they "... turn the world upside down."⁴ Parables are about wonder. Toddlers have only lived on earth for less than twenty-four months so they wonder all the time. Since toddlers are developing language, silence dwells in them already. They experience God's mystery in unspeakable ways, ways beyond adults' understanding. The sacred story, in the toddler class, was made available for the young child to use during play and come to love God's story. Liturgical acts came through the whole outline of the Toddler class. This language came through the symbols of lamb, angel wings, prayer, blessing and holy meal.

³ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play*, 39.

⁴ Ibid.

Religious language for the very young child came through ritual and symbol. Many families appreciated “The Sacred Space Box.” This presented a concrete item to help families focus. It helped children and adults connect with God through the language of symbol. In the toddler classroom “The Sacred Space Box” ritual offered comfort and security. The child knew what to expect and enjoyed each segment of the ritual. The child also became more fully engaged in the ritual. Sunday School teachers and families practiced the same discipline of “The Sacred Space Box” which strengthened not only comfort levels, but the value of worship.

It was our Jewish heritage that taught the importance of ritual with symbols. If parents nurture and teach faith to their children they would need resources and ideas. Parents appreciated suggested ways of sharing their faith with their children using tangible items as reminders of what people of faith need to do to stay connected with God. “The Sacred Space Box” invited parents to discover a comfortable way of talking about their faith with their young child. It provided a comfort level for adults, who felt inadequate in their own faith language, to begin simply with their children.

The meal at the table symbolized the family gathered to share in Christian fellowship. The language of a holy meal prepared the children and the adults to receive God’s gift of love. The religious language used in class transferred to worship from holy meal to communion or Eucharist. The simple changing of terms brought the snack to a different level of meaning. It reminded adults that these children are part of the family of God. The adults in the room did not join the children at the table. The holy meal required adults helping children with dropped napkins and food. The adults were not seated at the

picture. The meaning of family would be stronger if the adults were at the table, too. This added piece was a reminder that all God's family are welcome at the table.

As children participated in new experiences their brain created more synapses. When a toddler participated in the BBSN model, the brain synapses for spiritual language grew. The toddler willingly tried new things, some with caution and others uninhibited. Their eyes filled with wonder. Parents spoke of how their toddler could say the name of a mascot of a sports team or recognize a commercial by the music. Therefore, the church family can help families with words, phrases and music for the child to repeat that speak of gratitude, blessings, and God's stories.

Hearing adults at home use language referring to sacred space, holy time, prayer box, sharing God's blessing, praying hands gave the child the tools to feel at ease when at church. Learning the religious language of prayer, community, holy meal with God's family, teach a way of being God's family. This positive language, which came out of God's goodness, would be invaluable in the development of self-worth in a child. "When persons feel worthy of love; the love of God as well as of persons, then they are able to cope with whatever circumstances come."⁵

As children echoed or answered questions by pointing or making sounds, the adults celebrated with words of praise. In this class children experienced praise and compliments rather than reprimands or scolding. The language of blessing healed where negative comments would break the spirit.

Adults have language to describe faith development at various ages and stages. However, to describe the faith development of a toddler, who was non-verbal, would mean a new description. This description of a toddler's faith may be difficult for adults to

⁵ Marshall, *Living the Faith with Young Children*, 67.

interpret. Since toddlers are non-verbal, adults need to be sensitive to the child's language. Non-verbal faith development happened as a child repeated the adult's faith expressed through words or actions. A few children signed for wanting more of something. A toddler who offered open arms wanted to be held or hugged. A toddler's bright eyes exhibited eagerness, awe and surprise.

Toddlers used their entire bodies to speak. Their body language followed the leader in folding hands in prayer. A young child, not able to voice joys, concerns or happy and sad moments, found ways to practice coming close to God. Their prayer came through wonder as they experienced something for the first time.

Music played a big role in religious language. Toddlers moved and danced to praise God. The repetition of songs stayed in their memory as their language and words increased from week to week.

Young children whose family spoke about their faith, prayed with their family and served others, developed their religious language skills. A family who celebrated holy days offered opportunities to dialogue about their faith. St. Luke's church offered an experiential Good Friday service for families with young children. Stations of the Cross were arranged throughout a couple of large rooms in the church. The families gathered as one body for the first and last stations. The rest of the stations were for families to experience and journal with their children. Some parents remarked that they found it too difficult for their child's level of understanding. This author responded, "The time spent with the toddler walking barefooted on the stony path ten times was significant. Do not worry that the child did not experience all the stations. The important thing is that you and your child are sharing your faith through experience." Though the young child had

not developed linguistic skills, they were present while other family members discussed the story of Jesus walk to the cross.

Even with a language barrier children still made connections related to faith concepts or symbols and adults managed to made a connection as well. Connections were made with adults as they listened for the ways the child taught about God's kingdom. The big connection, for this author, came as the toddler said each person's name when sharing God's blessing. She knew the importance of names.

Holy or religious language, both verbal and non-verbal, when practiced became prayerful attitudes which grow holy children and families. The early practice of religious language takes on deeper meanings. The continued development of a child's language related to worship, prayer, communion and blessing will mature as the child grows older.

Environment

Parents value a church offering the best for their child. First impressions matter to parents when it comes to their little child and it should. Children, a gift from God, need adults to advocate for church nursery spaces that shine. God gave us little children to care for and to shower them with knowing God's love. Spending hundreds of thousands of dollars does not necessarily guarantee quality, but spending significant time in the inspection of safety, cleanliness, organization, and updating of furnishings and toys was priceless to a family's first impression.

Parents, especially new parents, value a clean and safe environment. A parent would not hesitate to leave their child in one of St. Luke's newly created nursery rooms. In fact, the beauty of the rooms drew parents to check further into what the church

nursery offers families. The theme-decorated environment welcomed, even without people, families and spoke volumes on hospitality. Age appropriate tables and chairs, shelving units holding toys and even tiny toilets announced what size of child comes to this space. The physical appearance of the toddler room invited families in, but the adults who greeted the children one on one, at their eye-level, reassured parents that children would be cared for well. The typical church nursery often stopped their hospitality at this point assuming nothing else would be needed to accommodate the child's needs.

Prior to the renovation of the toddler class the rooms were dirty and cluttered. After renovation the space had interest and cleanliness. This let families know that the youngest children in St. Luke's church were very important.

Only three of the fifteen families, who had children in the act of ministry project toddler class, had any association with the nursery prior to the renovation of the rooms. The toddlers were infants at the time the new rooms opened. Only one parent had an older child who had been through four years of Sunday School and Children's Center care in the old facility. This father commented how wonderful the new space was for their youngest son who spent six days a week in this great facility. He commented that their son especially liked the windows near the floor. Each day he waves to other children in the other rooms. This parent has noticed other children peering out of the windows and said, "If there was a way to ask the children (ages birth to age two), I would not be surprised to find out that those windows were their favorite aspect of the new design."

A mother of a three-year old child described the previous space as shabby, as if the children really were not that important in the eyes of the church. She stated, "The new rooms are beautiful and inviting. It really sends a message that my children are important

and so is the care they will receive.” Another mother of a three-year old commented that the rooms were less than inviting when they first brought child to the nursery. “The new space is very inviting and well kept. The storage space in the rooms allows less of a daycare look. Two years ago, I was embarrassed as to how cluttered the spaces were. I am now very proud to show off our facility.”

The environment was more than space. This BBSN environment provided a ritual that allowed children to experience God through playful and prayerful expressions. Curriculum, hospitality, and relationships are all parts of environment. Each of these contributed to creating a place for optimal sharing of faith. The space, arranged in the same way each week, gave the children a sense of comfort knowing what to expect. The uncluttered space focused on the purpose of the time spent together in class. This was demonstrated with the crèche as the center of focus in the room. The environment provided a place for children and adults to experience a relational blessing.

Curriculum and Story

Parents desired an introduction to a Christian life for their child. They hoped their child would experience a balance of educational and spiritual activities along with play. Classes offered to adults, youth and elementary children, preschool children, toddlers and infants all need to claim high standards of balancing spiritual, educational and recreational activities. This would be an opportunity to develop an evaluation tool for churches to identify what are the missing pieces in offering a balance to shape persons towards wholeness.

Very little Sunday School curriculum has been written for children under the age of two. The bigger challenge would be finding curriculum which acknowledged the spirituality of young children capable of offering their witness to God's story.

Toddlers learned about their family and their identity within the family as their story was told in scrapbooks filled with photos. The wordless stories and their pictures created synapses in the brain that build on the child's identity. If those stories are not present there was no way for knowing the family history or how the family related to one another. The same would be true in discovering Christian identity. If stories are not shared the connections to God's family are lost. It was in the stories where identity is found and connections made. It was in stories where hope was discovered in the deepest despair, and how God may be magnified in miracle moments.

A God-centered toddler class curriculum depended on the adults as guides. These guides offered children avenues to love God's story and allowed God to work in and through the child. The story or word of God was shared with the use of age appropriate books, activities and toys. The repetition of hearing the story, over a four to five week period, imprinted the story in the mind and heart of the child. The children loved identifying items, animals and people in the story.

The author trusted that the child made meaning of the story at their developmental stage, and that toddlers experienced another level of meaning every time they heard the story. The oral tradition of story telling demonstrated by Hebrews showed how the telling of the story passed from generation to generation. The placing of God's word on the doorpost was a non-verbal way of telling God's story. "The Sacred Space Box" offered a way to pass the story on for families in the twenty-first century.

The crèche, the most important element for the toddlers' curriculum, clearly needed a prominent location. The placement of the crèche gave the children access to play with each piece in the sacred Christmas story. Common toys which became spiritual toys for the lesson included halos, angel wings, baby dolls and blankets, lambs and storybooks. All of these spiritual toys enhanced God's work among the children.

Children gave adults new insights on the story presented. The familiar birth story of Jesus, when told simply, brought another view to the adult reflection when using the words "daddy" and "mommy." Having these littlest children leading the class and telling the story of Jesus' birth invited the adult to come close to the child Jesus and remember that precious gift from God. It was in the telling of stories where meaning was experienced.

Other possibilities for a toddler to have experienced the story of Jesus birth might include a life-size stable scene, at the appropriate height for toddlers, with manger and baby doll. Another idea would be to ask a farmer to bring a lamb for children to see or take families on a field trip to the barn.

The author searched for published toddler curriculum. She purchased United Methodist curriculum recommended for toddlers and twos only to find it as a resource for ideas. A few of the same activities happen each week, but generally each week's material changed within the same format. The suggested crafts and activities were not age-level appropriate for most eighteen to twenty-four month old children. What this author found lacking in the curriculum was the same simple story and prayer used week after week. Also missing was religious language that connected the class time with worship. There

were not any age-level developmental charts identifying characteristics differing an eighteen-month old with a thirty-month old child.

Relationships and Community

The parents held their child and peered from the doorway into the classroom. They looked first at the people and then the objects in the room. People were first!

Consistent adult commitments fostered trust so the child may open up to experience their time in class. Relationships created trust between the children and the adults. As adults gave attentiveness to children it empowered meaningful relationships. Blessing happened. Relationships deepened. Thus, the author found evidence for the importance of long-term volunteers. The expectation of the adults included a view of young children as relational rather than vessels to pour in right answers, or babies who are not capable of anything but play. In the toddler Sunday School class, the adults understood their role to engage with the children in God's story and spiritual play.

Building relationships strengthened God's community and the young child attained a comfort level upon entering the room when they saw a familiar face. The young child's eyes lit up when they recognized the adult outside of class. When the child saw the teacher and ran to her, the teacher's heart was warmed! The child and teacher connected with a holy moment in a three-way relationship, God, teacher and child!

How joyful to gather toddlers and expect a worship time. Developmentally these young children needed someone to help them learn how to sit in a circle. Some people would not even try such an action because the children would not be old enough. The clumpy circle formed around the sacred space with the help of all the adults in the room.

A few children did not come to the circle, but wandered the room still exploring and playing. Allowing children to wander the room during circle time gave children the power of choice. When children did join the circle, it indicated the child had matured to the point of joining with the group. This would be a time to praise the toddler for making the choice to join the community. A ratio of three children to one adult, helped move most of the children to the circle and experience a holy time with God. Children learned the value of the gathered community of faith when entering into the holy circle time as God's family.

What parents and other adults do not grasp was that play was an important building block for relationships. Playing with children builds relationships. For adults, eating meals together creates the time to build relationships. The church nursery needed to provide a setting for spiritual play.

This author emphasized, again, Horace Bushnell's advice for parents to play with their child.⁶ The child invited the adult to "come and play" or "come and see" and adults found joy in the relationship. Both received a blessing without a blessing stick. These volunteers experienced rewards of little voices echoing their first prayer or climbing onto a lap to hear one of God's stories over and over again.

The added activity after the story, the response time to God's word, brought surprises to the author. It became a group project without any glue! The children were not concerned with having their own paper. They drew on each other's paper and it became a community project. The toddlers focused on what to do with the star or the crayon, and

⁶ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 55, quoting Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908): 10.

not about having his or her personal work. The work of God comes through community. Relationships that work together created a better response to God's word.

When children practiced using "The Sacred Space Box," at home, it was practiced in relationship with someone else, usually the mother. The young child and the mother celebrated God's presence and then wanted to celebrate God's presence through the practice of prayer and blessing with others in their family. How amazing to hear stories of young children who felt the importance of community worship without an adult's suggestion for sacred time.

Prayer

The echo prayer offered simple words for the young child to begin a prayer life. This would provide a way for the child to practice verbalizing and communicating with God. Prayers of gratitude are often learned first. An attitude of prayer adults need to practice more often, too. Young children learned the importance of talking to God and thanking God for gifts. Gratitude, emphasized in a simple child's prayer, offered an uplifting and positive attitude.

The prayer echoed allowed children to learn another piece of religious language: that of communicating with God. Children pray unceasingly through the living and playing of prayer and are the essence of prayer while at spiritual play. Yet, they need other tools to learn how to communicate with God as their faith matures. Toddlers learn how adults verbalize their awareness of God. When teaching a toddler to pray, pray simply. The adult spoke one word at a time. Children gained confidence and self-esteem as they receive affirmation in their ability to echo words in the prayer. What a gift for adults to focus and listen to each word. This allows adults to spend more time with God.

The slower conversation of prayer moved adults to prayerful attentiveness to the content of the prayer. Children need to hear the adults pray and sing. Even though this author came upon this fact unintentionally, it would be important to invite other adults in the room to model prayer by repeating after the lead teacher so children learn to follow the example.

Families with pre-school children found the slower, reflective time in prayer a point of renewal as they shared joys and concerns. This prayer ritual formed trust with each other. If a child never sees a family member pray, the child will not know prayer. Jesus modeled prayer for his disciples, so disciples today shall model, also. Omitting the practice of prayer with toddlers takes away the important offering of praise and gratitude to God and learning how to come close to God as language develops.

Holy Listening

The circle time practiced a way of paying attention to God's story and paying attention to the goodness in each person. Children and adults gave witness to their faith as they spent time in listening to one another with a holy attitude. An experience of holy listening involved the adult, the child and God. The witness of faith began as soon as the adult and child greeted each other at the door with a holy hospitality. Adults gave witness to God's goodness as they practiced holy listening to a child's needs and allowed a child in their lap to hear the story again. Adults validated every child with their undivided attention and praise. When adults listened to children with holy listening, they were genuinely present to the child. Adults practiced holy listening as they sought God's

direction in caring for the toddlers. If the practice of holy listening faltered, the adults emphasized the value of their own selfish needs.

Holy listening with toddlers caused adults to look for the obscure work of God. Holy listening prepared adults to pay attention to the spirituality of the young child. Surprises came not just to toddlers but also to the adults as toddlers expressed their faith in the simplest format. The witness for a toddler came through play as a child wore the halo and wings and demonstrated God's beauty. The more one practiced holy listening the more holy listening was ingrained into life. Adults only needed to practice holy listening to recognize God's goodness. When practiced, blessings are much easier to identify and name. "One of the best ways to grasp your children's spiritual growth is to develop a listening habit."⁷ Holy listening freed adults to allow a child to lead them into the kingdom of God. Knowing children lead the church now came from adults who pay attention to the presence of God in a child.

Sacred Space

One weekday, the Children's Center toddler class came to chapel time for their first time. Nineteen-month old Reese, who attended the toddler Sunday School, had learned about sacred space and blessing. He entered the chapel with his class and confidently walked toward the leader. He held out his hand to receive a blessing! Reese learned it in his Sunday morning toddler class and did not forget it after twelve weeks had passed! This sacred time was valued by this child and remembered.

The children loved "The Sacred Space Box." Children initiated the practice of "The Sacred Space Box" in their own homes. This action affected the families' ritual.

⁷ Halverson, *Helping Your Child Discover Faith*, 20.

Was it the box and items within the box that the child enjoyed? The child desired having everyone in the family worship together which indicated what the children loved was the holy time with their family, guests and God. A toddler's desire for community included everyone. Do churches take such a stance on leaving out no one as they worship together?

The creation of sacred space offered openness to the holy as the worship cloth and candle were positioned. The lighted candle reminded everyone of a holy time with God and each other. The worship cloth named the liturgical color for the Advent season. The prepared worship space laid a foundation for later years when entering into a time of worship. The creation of sacred space emphasized the holy, a special time with God and with God's people. Each time the child listened to a prayer or watched the lead teacher's movements to a song, the child made meaning for what the action could be for them. To omit a sacred space would omit the acknowledgment of God's presence and the importance of participating in worship to honor God.

Families added other items to enhance their sacred time together such as the offering box, a biblical storybook or book significant to the child's comfort, or prayer beads to assist in a spoken prayer. These items helped enrich the worship time and extend connection with God and God's people.

Ritual developed because "The Sacred Space Box" proved to be a tool for the family to create a time in their day devoted to God. Parents were surprised that their child knew how to arrange the sacred space, both at home and in the Sunday School class. When sacred space was modeled worship became priority for the child. "The Sacred

Space Box” or prayer box, as some families called it, brought families together to enjoy a sacred time with God and teachable moments for everyone.

Modeling Spiritual Disciplines

Modeling spiritual disciplines was not in the original list of words, but surfaced as this author discerned the meaning of important elements in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture. Karan Marshall, Christian educator, commented, “We live our faith with our children.”⁸ When we live our faith we model the best ways to be with God and God’s people. Doing this at church and at home reinforced the identity that this was the way God’s family lives together and connects with God.

Adults modeled attributes of God and little eyes watched. Therefore, adults needed to take responsibility for developing their personal spiritual habits. If a child watched daddy shave, the child attempted to shave; if the child saw daddy with a Bible, every book became a bible for the child. If adults model the process of spiritual discernment the child grows to understand the process.

Adults modeled the practices of their faith as they engaged in spiritual play. The child’s eyes watched how adults practiced hospitality or how adults gave little attention to others. The child listened intently to the sharing of a blessing or prayer. Children also listen when hurtful words fly through the air. The spiritual practices modeled by adults in class and modeled by family members in the home become ingrained. Since adults personify attributes of God to toddlers, toddlers depend on their nurturing adult to know God.

⁸ Marshall, *Living the Faith with Children*, 7.

Children watched adults sing and as children became comfortable they attempted to sing. The lead teacher modeled how to place hands together for prayer time. Although the lead teacher led the echo prayer it was unintentional to have other adults repeating the prayer. However, this lesson God intended for the author. Non-verbal children or children learning the language need to hear others pray and gain confidence in their own prayerful words. God planned for those adults to respond that day. After all, Jesus taught the disciples to pray saying words the hearers had to learn. (Matthew 6:9-13)

The adults modeled values as they played with the children. The value of playing with the nativity pieces with a sense of wonder and awe, the respect given to preparing the sacred space with slow moments and careful placement of each item, the value of attention given solely to God's story and God's children. The lead teacher modeled hugging the little lamb and claiming God's love and then passed the lamb and God's love on to the next person. The amazing result came while watching these very young children give up a toy lamb to the next person without a fuss!

Spirituality of Toddlers Adult Class

Reflections on the three-week class, Spirituality of Infants and Toddlers, found parents very interested in "The Sacred Space Box." "The Sacred Space Box" highlighted the whole experience for this author. In the first session, parents appreciated the confirmation that their child had spirituality. It was important for them to hear that they are the role models for a way of life in God's kingdom.

In session two the discussion focused on how families nurture a child's spirituality, how families practice spirituality, and how those disciplines laid a foundation

for their children. However, much of the class time centered around talking to their child about sin, death, heaven and hell.

Session Three focused on how the church supported families in nurturing and blessing one another. Surprisingly, there was very little discussion on baptism. No one shared if his or her family did not practice with “The Sacred Space Box.” Perhaps those were the quiet ones in class. Parents of preschool children who practiced with “The Sacred Space Box” spoke how their child became very upset if the parents forgot to do something during the ritual. This pointed to the importance of ritual.

The role of the church family should communicate ways to nurture at home. The giving of “The Sacred Space Box” provided a gift from the church family to enhance worship in the toddler’s home. This gift offered families a way of talking about God and faith, sharing in prayer, and celebrating the blessings God gives to each person in the family.

The word list, which focused on elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, are not to be defined alone. The words intertwine for a true Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture experience. One strand of thread, when coupled with other strands becomes a stronger cord. Each sacred action that happened in the Sunday School Class when reinforced at home added threads to the cord and became stronger. The family’s faith strengthened. Practicing with “The Sacred Space Box” at home and at church united everyone in the importance of sharing in worship and loving God.

Summary

There had been a low expectation for a toddler's spiritual growth and a low expectation of the adult leading toddlers. This project affected the quality of Sunday School class time offered to toddlers. Parents were eager for their young children to receive spiritual content in Sunday School. They desired a serious faith development for themselves, but were unaware of what the church could offer beyond babysitting. They were also skeptical towards how much their child could do related to spirituality. Adults do not need to fill the child's brain with spiritual content; instead, the responsibility of the adult was one of openness to receiving a blessing, another blessing and another. The parents' stories of their child's experiences during this project was a demonstration of the child's innate spirituality.

This act of ministry demonstrated the three assumptions set forth at the beginning of this project:

1. Children have an innate spirituality. Children's spirituality connects to God in ways beyond an adult's understanding. Children model a way of life in God's kingdom.
2. Families nurture a child's innate spirituality. Families recognize, affirm and nurture a child's spirituality towards increasing wholeness, especially through prayer and holy listening.
3. The church family, through its education and worship life, supports the nurturing ministry of families by offering a safe and enriching space appropriate for families to learn and grow together; and by providing ideas, resources and guidance in the practices of nurturing in a pattern that announces and channels the blessing of God.

The results of this act of ministry were measured through qualitative research. This included (1) the physical environmental changes and how children and adults received a new environment; (2) curriculum development, (3) how adult leaders changed

their approach in teaching and caring for children; (4) and how many families chose to participate in such a program and what they took home to continue the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture experience.

Fifteen young children, ages eighteen to twenty-four months, received a classroom make-over as well as a make-over in their curriculum model for growing and sharing their faith. The act of ministry set in motion a ritual for spiritual formation throughout life. Delighted parents discovered that their child played happily in an age appropriate Sunday School class with spiritual toys related to the biblical topic for the month. The act of ministry was not difficult. The most difficult part was getting an adult body on the floor to be able to interact and move around with toddlers!

The author modified the original outline. Those modifications included combining worship time with circle time and referring to the snack time as a holy meal rather than the feast. See Appendix E After just three weeks, the children knew the Sunday morning routine. They knew the adults and other children, they knew about circle time, blessing, prayer, and a holy meal. The leaders established a ritual for their time together.

Children gained an understanding of the sacred space created at circle time. The act of ritual recognized the importance of this special time with God and God's children. A time intended for building a strong foundation for the child's faith to continue its development came through relationships. All the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture became part of the child's daily experience with God when practiced at church and at home.

Using the same ritual, the same story, the same song, and the same prayers emphasized the importance repetition played in building spiritual synapses in the brain.

The repetition offered comfort and a safe place to try new things including language for the young child. The same questions, prayers, blessing and song gave the child a sense of confidence. The same story with the same questions reinforced what the child was learning. Even the same echo prayer gave children confidence in participating in the prayer. A child's regular attendance in the toddler class increased comfort levels.

The Sunday School class for toddlers provided an outline basic to Christian worship. This basic outline of worship was a ritual which helped to shape toddlers towards a mature faith. It included a gathering time, opening activities, the word of God presented in a story, a time for children to respond to God's word, a holy meal and departing time.

Discoveries made included the best way to reinforce learning or to develop disciplines in faith came through repetition. The importance of ritual and staying with not only story for the month but staying with the same wording of the story, the same prayers and actions reinforced the elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture in each child's life. Naming toys as spiritual toys brought a new sense of value to the common toys. Allowing children to participate in their own spirituality through play gave the toddler control to speak to God in their own way.

The places in the project that needed improvement included the sending forth and the communication with parents. A newsletter which informed parents of what their child experienced in the toddler class bridging connections between church and home. The sending forth would be another teachable moment. Developing words for a sending forth for both parent(s) and child would remind everyone of the mission to God's world. An offering of peace and love would extend the BBSN to the family and the world.

This act of ministry incorporated elements of educational developmental theories from Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory, Jerome Berryman's Godly Play theory and Don Roger's ESFI theory.⁹ The author described the MI in the toddler class and how the toddler class attained each of Rogers four elements. See Appendix H

BBSN enfolded the student and the teachers in a way that lived out prayer. Seeing the child or person through the eyes of blessing, seeing them as the face of Christ changed the spirit in which God's story was shared and experienced. BBSN offered a way for the teacher to perceive the student which accepted the child with an innate spirituality. James Michael Lee emphatically stated, "Understanding how the gifts of God's grace are given and received is central to religious instruction because teaching deals with the way God's grace is given and learning deals with the way God's grace is received."¹⁰ Teachers and parents experience grace through BBSN.

A BBSN church nursery included the best elements of Christian education, spiritual formation, developmental theories and educational theories, which offered a higher quality to the church nursery. John Westerhoff stated, "Ritual must always be at the heart of Christian education for the community's liturgy, Story and action emerge; in worship we remember and we act in symbolic ways which bring our sacred tradition and our lives together, provide us a with both meaning and motivation for daily existence."¹¹ The practice of a Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture model beginning in the nursery, will become important enough to continue through elementary, youth, and adult Christian

⁹ Rogers, *ESFI*.

¹⁰ Norma H. Thompson, ed. *Religious Education and Theology* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1982), 107.

¹¹ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, 60.

Education. If this holds true, then preschool, elementary Sunday School classes and confirmation classes will need to offer a deeper level of learning and higher standard of leadership development.

Conclusion

Why was it important to have Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements incorporated into a Sunday School class for toddlers? The following conclusions proved the importance for setting up this model of Sunday School for the church nursery toddler class.

One, a toddler's spirituality was valued. The church valued and children and made them a priority. Adults valued the child's spirituality through holy listening. Toddlers experienced validation of their gifts to the community.

Two, toddlers experienced a strong sense of belonging to a loving church family. The prepared environment included teachers ready and attentive to children who welcomed and comforted both parent and child. The hospitality felt extended beyond the classroom to the immediate family. As the child grows, this hospitality will extend to the church, the community and to the world.

Three, it was in the power of blessing where attitudes changed. Toddlers believe in the goodness of blessings. This goodness provided positive emotions that gave hope. In blessing, the face of Christ came to the forefront for both adult and child. Positive experiences in the church nursery entrenched the child's memory. The power of blessing as a community celebrated joy in God and God's people. Blessing delighted in gratitude.

Four, the church helped families interpret meaning with classes designed for adults to discover their own values and their child's spirituality,

Five, a new level of adult guidance in the church nursery developed. The author confirmed her belief in the value of long-term volunteers. It was much easier to build relationships when greeted by the same face. Toddlers follow, repeat, echo and mirror every move of the adults in their life, so it was important to have committed volunteers.

Six, adults led by example through words and actions. Examples led children toward holiness. Goodness blessed the adult leaders as children responded to voice inflections of assurance and comfort. Positive messages of encouragement rather than critical voices sent examples that strengthen self-image. The toddlers experienced joy as adults lived God's goodness.

Seven, toddlers love ritual, and this class laid a solid foundation for a way to experience God through ritual. "The Sacred Space Box" proved to be a great invention! This gave families one way to practice worship in the home. The more children heard and played God's story the more spiritual connections were made.

One parent offers these comments: "Children respond to familiarity. Things they see at church AND at home (nativity, prayer box, blessing stick). What a difference it makes for the children, particularly feeling comfortable and safe at church, when they see and experience the same things at home. Church was a very separate thing in my home. We went every Sunday, but we didn't see faith related things at home (prayers, stories, toys, etc.). The power of reinforcing church at home and vice versa is exponential."

A reflection on the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements affirmed the innate spirituality of these young children. This project affected a families' awareness of God

working through their child. Parents took notice of toys as a spiritual witness of faith for their child. The negative outcomes pertained to leaving out elements of BBSN. What the church nursery does not teach, teaches.

Looking to the Future

Future research could develop additional resources for the church to give to parents in the nurture of their child's spirituality. The development of a scope and sequence for Christian education curriculum focused on the young child would be helpful.

The development of a survey on how the church fulfills the vows of baptism could be a helpful tool for churches.

More research on James Fowler's intuitive faith in light of the new brain research might provide additional insights towards a maturing faith in adults. The current developmental charts do not rank children under the age of three on faith development or even try to image a young child's spirituality. More research of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences related to toddlers could be explored. It benefited the lead teacher to reflect upon the way a toddler might experience the learning. Further research in the nurture of a toddler's spiritual growth might provide additional connections to multiple intelligences. The question is, "Are there some intelligences that should receive more focus during the first three years?" If the child was not nurtured, spiritual growth may be stunted. A negative and pessimistic spirit rather than a spirit of goodness and optimism could develop. The brain synapses, created through spiritual learning and the spirituality already present in a toddler, could discover how goodness and positive attitudes affect the

toddler's faith development. Much more research on BBSN and brain development is needed.

Research and development of training paid staff or volunteers which includes discussion on observing the spirituality of a child would be beneficial. Help is needed in learning how to pay attention to God in each child, identify, and celebrate the child's spirituality.

Research could offer the church ideas that strengthen families, ideas related to values. The world values such things as name brand clothing and furniture, enrolling early for various activities, hurrying children in their development and hurrying children from place to place. How will the church help families find other values? What are the values for eighteen to twenty-four month old children and their families? Values would include rituals that honor God, family communication, and quality spiritual time spent with children. Publishers have addressed some of these topics but church families rarely use them.

Future research might discern what spiritual toys or symbols, learned from the toddler class, carried the child into developing a richer faith? What symbols shape faith? What toys help children talk about faith in their language of play? Parents were very interested in finding spiritual toys or toys that could be used spiritually.

Another fascinating research would be the follow-up with families who participated with "The Sacred Space Box" to discover its continued use and how it impacted the faith development of their child and family. Research into the power of religious language could discover how the changing of words encouraged, uplifted and

focused on blessing among family members. More research related to music and Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture might reveal things that work well for the non-verbal child.

Research and development strengthening spiritual disciplines among the adults in the family for the sake of their child's faith development might include charts for diet and exercise. The spiritual diet and exercise for nurturing their child's faith begins with them! The church family can encourage adults in the practice of spiritual disciplines. A discipline, when practiced consistently, develops a habit or ritual that moves one to positive change. "The Sacred Space Box" becomes a tool to help parents notice their child's spiritual practices and create a habit of coming close to God. These changes in habits move families to worship and prayer.

The development of toddler curriculum that suggests board books that can be used over and over rather than paper story cards would be a better investment. The purchase of suggested toys used for spiritual play would be more valuable than a packet of activities easily destroyed or are for a only one lesson. It may be that the simpler the teaching materials, the stronger the theology for the toddler. This was also better stewardship of resources.

Research on the comparisons of Christian education, Christian formation, faith development and Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture might reflect the way adults teach children.

Closing Statement

In closing, this author valued the spiritual nurture received from her mother. The stories of faith repeated over and over and the singing of "Jesus loves me" are both values the author received and continues to pass to her children and grandchildren. This

experience of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture made a difference to the author and though she did not attend church as a young child her mother nurtured her Christian faith. She taught her to pray, to learn stories and hymns of faith. It was through Jerome Berryman's¹² method of teaching the Biblical story that touched the author's heart. His method helped give handles to facing life's toughest situations. The author's mother used holy listening skills before they were written. She practiced disciplines that carried her through difficult phases of life and passed them to her daughter. The blessing of HeartPaths offered the author various experiences in prayer which carried her through cancer treatments. Relationships consistently helped the author stay on the right path.

This project helped the author reflect on the meaning of life. God created big people and little people to love and to learn to love. God created them for relationships. God did not necessarily intend that adults do all the teaching, but to listen, in holy ways, to how others love. God created all people to accept the unconditional love a child offers.

The learning and practice of these elements, early in life, would offer an array of options in relating to God, God's people and life situations. Berryman stated, "We can only give them the appropriate language, teach them the art of how to use it, and trust religious language, the community, and God to see them through."¹³ This practice would help children grow into adults who know God's stories, have confidence in coming forward to celebrate the Eucharist, focus on the blessings in life and have the tools to negotiate life's bumps.

¹² Berryman, *Godly Play*.

¹³ Ratcliff, *Handbook of Children's Religious Education*, 28.

The value of this act of ministry provided a model for churches to begin helping families grow spiritually and for churches to give priority to their little ones. The best way for God's people to give witness to God's love comes through positive people and positive environments. The telling of God's stories through play, relationships, and music embeds a fond memory of God for the child and a fond memory of their Sunday School class. If nothing else, holy relationships develop and both children and adults experience the presence of God.

What a joy it is for a church family to regard the very young child so highly as to allow a staff person to take time away to work on her doctoral program. Toddlers are able to participate in activities which shape their faith. Will someone advocate for the young children's spirituality? Who will encourage, wonder and affirm the toddler? What rituals will our church nurseries practice? The church can do more than babysitting.

APPENDIX A - DOCUMENTS FOR PROMOTION AND PERMISSION

PERMISSION FOR DOCTORAL STUDY

Rev. Charlotte Teel is working towards a doctorate in Children's spirituality. We ask your permission for your child to be observed for research related to spirituality in the nursery. This will be during the months of November and December. Please sign below giving authorization.

Date _____

WEE ADVENTURE SIGN IN

Parents: Please sign in and create a nametag. Keep the nametag stub and you'll need to return it when you pick up your child. Should you need a pager, note the pager number and return the pager when you return. Pagers are silent. They must be carried next to your body so the vibration can be felt when paging. Thank you.

[illegible]

November 22, 2006

Dear Families of Toddlers,

During the month of December, I am teaching in the Toddler class. This will take place in the striped room #102, 9:40 – 10:30 am.

I am working on my doctorate in Children's spirituality and want to try some things with children, ages 12 months – 24months. I need your permission to observe your child should I comment on my discoveries using your child's name and observations in my dissertation.

I look forward to this special time in December with your child and plan for this class to continue with other volunteers in 2007. If you would like to volunteer a month, please let me know. The plan is to have the same basic lesson (story or theme) for 2 months in a row. Young children love to hear the same story, song, or activity over and over and over.

Thank you for sharing your child!
Happy Thanksgiving!
Rev. Charlotte Teel

Dear Families,

Thank you for caring deeply for your child's spirituality. I will continue to teach the 9:40-10:30 A.M. toddler class in January as I work on my doctoral thesis. My hypothesis is that toddlers are capable of more than loving babysitting, but with help from adults who have a commitment to nurturing children in the faith, toddlers will develop their spirituality just as any other part of their growth development.

I want to invite you to take part in a 5-week class during st. Luke's Wednesday Alive beginning Jan. 17, 6:30-7:30 pm. Room number to be announced. I will teach a class on toddler's spirituality and plan to use information from my research and glean from you as a participant additional insights in nurturing toddlers in the faith. I encourage you to let me know and I'll sign you up for the class.

Yes, you are my practice group! I thank you so much for your support and believe you, your child and our entire church family will discover many blessings as we grow together in faith.

Rev. Charlotte Teel

APPENDIX B - COMPARISON OF TYPICAL NURSERY TO BBSN CLASS

OBSERVATION COMARISONS

Typical nursery

- Open cabinets of day care supplies, toys and sleeping mats created a sense of clutter.
- A mixture of styles of often second-hand furniture, poor lighting, plus window treatments, if any, indicated a low priority of care and maintenance.
- Two consistent paid staff cared for children weekly.
- One to four volunteers rotated during month in assisting paid staff and related to children.
- Curriculum prepared but inconsistently used.
- No format for the Sunday School hour gave very little intentionality to learning process.
- Adults led children in prayer infrequently.
- Children engaged in lots of individual play with whatever toys available from children's center.
- At times adults engaged in play and story with a child.
- Priority of care focused on diaper changes.
- Broad age span of children, twelve to thirty months, created challenges.
- Room felt chaotic.

BBSN toddler class

- Adequate storage with closed doors kept the room neat.
- Updated lighting, flooring and interior design indicated high priority of care and maintenance.
- One consistent paid staff cared for children weekly.
- One consistent lead teacher along with one consistent volunteer, and occasionally another volunteer related to children for six weeks.
- Class time consisted of a specific ritual allowing children and adults to gain comfort and assurance of what to expect when in class.
- Intentional lesson plans outlined a suggested schedule with age appropriate stories, activities and songs. Specific toys were suggested to enhance the story.
- Consistent ritual specific to circle time offered a holy space, blessing and echo prayer.
- The holy meal followed by playtime closed the morning.
- Adults related intentionally with children and noticed signs of spirituality blossoming in the young child.
- Rarely a diaper change needed.
- The structure of the class cut down on the chaos tremendously.
- The more specific age span focus helped with lessening chaos.

APPENDIX C - TODDLER CLASS PARENT SURVEYS

SURVEY #1

What is the reason for your child's attendance in the church nursery?

Describe the ideal church nursery for your child.

Doctoral Project Survey #2
Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture In the Church Nursery
Date: Dec. 3, 2006 by Rev. Charlotte Teel

☐ Parent ☐ Wee Adventure Volunteer ☐ Wee Adventure Paid Staff
Share your understanding of the following terms:

Blessing _____

Nurture _____

Hospitality _____

Spirituality _____

Ritual _____

Religious Language _____

Church Family _____

Environment _____

Curriculum _____

Relationships _____

Prayer _____

Holy Listening _____

Sacred Space _____

APPENDIX D - DATA COLLECTION

Data collected which asked parents to share their understanding of words the author used in developing a blessing based spiritual nurturing church nursery.

Doctoral Project Data - Dec. 3, 2006

Completed by parent(s) representing five families from the toddler class. One parent volunteered in the toddler class which is noted with an asterisk.

Blessing

A gift from God.

Goodness that is shared and grace that is given to us from God.

Praying for God's influence in a person's life.

What we receive from God.

A gift freely given by God to us or by us to one another.

A gift from God.

A gift from God. A special love*

Nurture

Encouraging growth in others.

Caring and protecting.

Loving someone and helping them grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Guidance we receive from parents.

To provide the physical and emotional elements necessary for growth and development.

Caring for others as children of God.

To care and take care of yourself and others.*

Hospitality

Caring for others.

Kind, friendly, and welcoming attitude towards another.

Welcoming someone into your home or your group. Treating them like you would want to be treated.

What we share with other people i.e. our homes, money, charity.

The virtue of welcoming others and providing comfort to others.

Caring for others first.

To treat others with love.*

Spirituality

A relationship with God.

Beliefs and our Christian faith.

Your beliefs in higher power. In the Christian community, your belief in God,

Jesus and the actions you take.

What we perceive as our guidance in life.

The quality of being aware of and participating in those parts of existence beyond the tangible world.

Focus on God; a relationship with God.

Communication with God; Faith in God.*

Ritual

Tradition or habit.

Pattern of behaviors that are repeated and share meaning.

Actions that are repeated and often have an important meaning to you.

What we do to celebrate events.

A repeated practice, the purpose of which is to invoke a higher awareness of the spirit as to worship.

Event or time set aside on regular basis where focus is put on God.

Something that you do consistently and regularly.*

Religious language (all words?)

To express spirituality.

The language which is spoken at worship.

Words that connect you to God and to your church family.

Words which connect us to God.

The jargon used to explain or discuss religion.

Talk about God and religion using theological terms and concepts.

Vocabulary of God.*

Church family

Others who share belief in God.

Family, a group of people, that support and encourage your faith, beliefs and values.

Members of your church and your Sunday School group or Bible study. On a broader scale: members of the Christian community.

The family we have in God, but not limited to St. Luke's.

Those who we share our faith with and then when we worship, come to know Christ.

Congregation of churches that pray and care for each other.

Community of those following God.*

Environment

Our surroundings.

surroundings; what our children live in at our home, church and school.

The space around you. What you are exposed to.

What Bush hopes to destroy.

The totality of our surroundings which affect us (perceived or unperceived).

Things and attitudes surrounding children that influence experience.

The world around you and the thoughts inside you.*

Curriculum

Lessons to learn.

Set of educational tools or educational agenda.

The items used to study a subject, i.e. books, videos.

Lessons taught from a book.

The plans and materials for teaching a lesson.

Organized lesson plans developed to teach specific ideas/concepts.

A planned lesson.*

Relationships

Connecting to others.

Interactions and friendships with others.

Any connection with another being. This could be a family relationship, work relationship, etc.

The way we treat other people depending upon our feelings for that person.

The interactions between and among.

(no answer)

Connection with others.*

Prayer

A method to communicate with God.

Meditation, thought with the lord, personal/group request for strength or prayer of thanks.

Spending time alone to talk to God.

Our devotional time with God.

Conversation with God.

Talking and listening to God.

Communication with God.*

Holy listening

Time to listen for God to communicate with us.

Hearing Jesus and his teachings/values in each other and what is being said.

Listening for God's voice and noticing his actions in your life.

Listening to God after prayer and following through on his guidance.

Listening to other people and to God in a focused and purposeful way; a form of prayer.

Listening to God and children with a spiritual lens.

Paying attention to your inner voice.*

Sacred space

Church – place of worship - nature; anyplace can be sacred.

Place that is protected.

Any space where you feel safe and secure and where you can keep things that are important to you.

Buildings or other religious items which we place as having a higher value as compared to other spaces.

An area set aside for prayer.

Space set aside for spiritual things.

A place to be quiet, still and listen.*

* Parent of

BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE WORD LIST

comfort	prayer	sacred space*	ritual	blessing	relational	Religious language	Spiritual Items added	other
Teachers comfort-divert crying child. Engaging children brings comfort Kids not forced to come to circle but wander to other toys. Blessing not forced.	Learn praying hands & short prayer: Dear God, thank you for today. Amen.	Circle time; set out purple cloth and battery candle, blessing stick & lamb. Kids want to reach for pieces, but teacher asks them to wait. Classroom is prepared	Circle time- love the lamb pass to next friend & thank you. Song with sounds & motions. Blessing-cross on back of hand: God created you, God blesses you, God loves you, God is always with (name). prayer	Smell of blessing stick has some curious. Blessing is not forced.	Teachers engage children with spiritual toys and other toys; teachers know children's names; adults give praise, encouragement, love, validated.	Identify animal sounds for nativity story; Identify objects. Body language indicating prayer time, circle time, snack time. Some give sign language for more and drink.	Wings, halos, nativity set, lambs Noah boat, animals Board books of story	snack-holy meal; Bible story books; Music: catches children's attention

DATA COLLECTION OBSERVATIONS BEFORE PROJECT

Notes from observers before act of ministry

Positive

Good management of room.

Regular routine of diaper changing.

Staff engaged children.

All children gathered for a snack.

Parent volunteer engaged children with reading and singing.

Adults knew all of the children's names!

Children played happily in the room with smaller number of children.

Most played contently by themselves.

Children comfortable with paid staff.

some newcomers nervous and had trouble engaging

The parents seemed pretty comfortable.

Parent questions answered promptly.

The lesson did not get started for quite awhile and some of the kids seemed to be very nervous, especially the younger ones and the newcomers.

Lots of chaos at the beginning and the end of the lesson. I think that the ritual of the lamb was really helpful to engage the kids but, once that was over the kids became very distracted.

No distinct end to the lesson and not enough coloring sheets.

Too many kids of too many different ages to engage the toddlers. The other major thing that stood out is that rituals do work. I think that the kids were engaged with the lamb exercise because it was familiar to them and each person had a turn.

space: very inviting and age appropriate.

Adults: quite attentive. Lots of diaper changes. Knows children's names.

Children: lots of parallel play. Children engaged with toys.

Note: wearing same pair of gloves to change all children; does wash hands in between and cleans changing table after each child.

Teachers interact with children facilitating group conversations. Reading stories aloud.

One child quite upset. After attempts to calm her, parent was paged.

Overall impression – great job! Children are in good care.

The room is clean, neat, colorful, with all furniture at their level.

The morning began with one child “up-chucking,” requiring more adult “hands” in the cleaning up process and disinfecting.

They have combined toddlers and 2 yr olds because a teacher is absent. Then enough volunteers arrived and toddlers were taken to their room. Most of the children were content to play with objects of interest on their own. Not especially sociable with other children.

The book corner attracted two or three at a time as a mother stayed and read and sang with them.

It really helped when the toddlers were removed. It seemed that when one child cried, others who otherwise had been content, started to cry.

Now the book corner has attracted 4 children with teacher on the carpet with once child in her lap.

Then, at the request of one child, they played ring around the rosie. All but one child entered in. In doing so, they were learning about "rules," being more group-oriented, and enjoying a group activity. It lasted three rounds, and their interest was then on toys and climbing (individual activities

I overheard teachers saying they had not received their lesson plan this morning and the special Bible was missing. So they didn't have coloring or anything organized.

APPENDIX E - TODDLER CLASS OUTLINE

#1

This Advent/Christmas outline was not used as written..

Greeting

Volunteers and staff in toddler class wore green vests with St. Luke's imprinted on the front. This quickly identified adults who had background checks and were leading the class.

Each family welcomed with special notice given to the child.

Spiritual toys ready for play: nativity set, lambs, cows, board books, puzzles, baby dolls and blankets, manger, Christmas music and anything biblical pointing out the holy family.

Circle time

A biblical story engaged multiple intelligences of child by the use of a worship box containing a candle, Bible lamb, stable of animals; wood block for a Clippity-clop sound; halos, wings, and shepherd dress up clothes; board books flannel figures on a board and holy family figures.

The story told by lead teacher:

"Here is Mary, the mommy. Here is the donkey Mary rode on to Bethlehem. Here is Joseph, the daddy. Here is the stable. Here is the baby, Jesus. Baby Jesus lays in a manger of hay. The shepherd comes to see baby Jesus. The angels sing about baby Jesus. Cows and sheep see the baby Jesus. We love the baby Jesus."

Song tune - Mulberry Bush

The donkey goes to Bethlehem, clippity-clop, clippity-clop.

The donkey goes to Bethlehem with Joseph and Mary.

Worship time

The morning concluded with small lamb, candle, songs, prayer, and blessing. A purple cloth for advent and white for Christmas designated the Christian year.

Feast

Water, crackers, cups, plates, napkins and prayer. When finished with snack, children played with spiritual toys until parents returned to pick up child.

TODDLER CLASS OUTLINE #2

The author began the toddler class without notes from the prepared plan. The following modified outline developed as a result.

Greeting

Welcome children and their families. (same)

Spiritual toys ready to play with children (same)

Circle time

Began by preparing the sacred space with same items as planned. The story of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus told by the lead teacher while pointing out pictures in a book. She stated, "Here's the mommy. Here is the daddy. Here is the baby. Here is the cow. Here is the sheep. Here is the donkey. What does the sheep say? Where's the baby?" Children responded to each question.

Then the leader sang a song, but since the plan was not in front of the leader she came up with a new song to the tune of "The Wheels on the Bus."

The mommy in the stable goes rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye,
 The mommy in the stable goes rock-a-bye all through the night.
 The cow in the stable goes moo, moo, moo . . .
 The daddy in the stable goes shh, shh, shh . . .
 The baby in the stable goes wah-wah-wah . . .
 The sheep in the stable go baa-baa-baa . . . all through the night.

The circle time ended with the blessing and the echo prayer. (same)

Response

Crafts or activities that reinforce the story.

Holy Meal

Adults brought children to the table for the holy meal. A change of wording which in the earlier plan named it the feast. No drink provided. Each child received a cup with animal cookies. The children immediately began to eat as they received their snack which made the prayer come in the middle of the eating or completion of the meal.

Departing

Children and adult play with spiritual toys until parents arrived. (same)

MODIFIED TODDLER CLASS OUTLINE #3

GATHERING - Class began with a time of greeting, among children and adults. A schedule, routine or ritual encouraged gathering time for adult leaders and children to get acquainted and become integrated into the class.

OPENING - A sacred space was prepared to hear God's word.

WORD OF GOD - The hearing and sharing of the word of God came during circle time. Circle time included the lighting of the candle to remind those present of God's presence, the witness to God's word through story and play, Gods' blessing received and shared with others and closed with prayer.

RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD OR OFFERING OF GIFTS - A craft and/or playtime, with spiritual toys, gave a pathway to give witness to God's word. This activity related to the story to reinforce the story and enhance ways to connect with God.

HOLY MEAL - The change of language from snack to a holy meal presented an attitude of holy presence as God's family ate together.

SENDING FORTH - Children told good-bye as the families picked up their children from Sunday School.

APPENDIX F - OBSERVATIONS

Doctoral Project Observations of Church Nursery

Date _____ Room # _____ Approx. ages _____

Time arrived to observe _____ Time completed observation _____

Tell the story of what you observed in the nursery class today. Include the moments before there are children in the room until after the children leave. What do you notice about the room? About the adults? About the children? Anything else? Please fill free to write on the back or attach additional pages.

Observers Name _____

Thanks for your work today!

ASSISTING VOLUNTEER OBSERVATIONS FOR TODDLER CLASS

DECEMBER 2006

Tell about the significant moments you experienced or observed in the toddler class.

“A little child shall lead them” – Matt.

Did you experience this in the toddler class? Describe.

PARENT OBSERVATIONS

Describe you and your child's experience with the Toddler Class during the month of December.

Name	Age	Sessions Attended	Parent Observations	Three week Parent class
Adam (male)	17 mos.	five	He was 18 months old when we began to implement the ritual of the "prayer box." The first time we tried the "prayer box" at home Mom and Adam created our sacred space in the living room and in the middle of the day It did not go well. He had trouble focusing and did not seem to understand "what game we were playing." A week later, when mom and dad were both available, we began to do the prayer box in Adam's room just before bed It was amazing....He really seemed to cherish this time. I think that it made a big difference that we did this in his room and that both parents were there. It was also helpful that this is the time of day, just after his bath, that he is relaxed and calm. We have repeated this ritual every night for close to a month. Sometimes it is just mom and Adam; sometimes Nathan (3 months) joins in; sometimes Nathan cries through the entire experience, but we continue to do our ritual. One night when Adam's aunts and cousins were over for dinner we invited them to do the prayer box with us. We all really enjoyed it. Our Ritual: Make sure his room is generally picked up; Get him completely ready for bed; Sit on the floor in a circle; Get out the Prayer Box; Set out the green felt; Turn on the candle and place it in the holder; Set out the Lamb, Blessing stick, and First Bible (short stories in poem form)....during Lent, we get out our offering box. He gets some coins to put in the offering box. We pass the lamb around and say, "God loves..." While we hug the lamb we read a Bible story...usually our child picks; We sing a short song; say an echo prayer....He can do praying hands, but has not figured out the echo yet. Then we do the blessing stick. Mom makes a cross on everyone's hand and says, "God loves...." Successes: Adam asks to do the "Prayer Box" every night...he will not let us forget it. Adam has been dealing with a little separation anxiety when he goes to church. On Sunday morning when I tell him they are going to do the prayer box, he is excited and goes right in. A couple of times I have needed to tend to Nathan just before Prayer Box time I ask Adam to set it up and he knows generally what to do. The Prayer Box comes up several times during the day, but we have left the ritual for just before bed The intent is	Mom attended; Dad attended one.

			to see this as different than the other “toys” and “activities” we do throughout the day. Challenges: What to do when we have a babysitter? Variations for different times of the church year. We (Dillon and I) have talked a lot about what we think it is that Adam is connecting with. However, he is so limited on his vocabulary we do not really know.	
Henry (male)	27 mos.	four	(Has Down’s Syndrome)	
Grant (male)	20 mos.	four	First, I think Grant seems more comfortable in the toddler room because there are scheduled activities: 1) play time, 2) song, 3) story, 4) blessing, and 5) snack. I think this makes him feel more secure and I believe that this age likes routine. Before, I think he just felt that it was chaotic. He has asked me to put the chap stick on his hand in the same way the teacher does when giving the blessing in class. Otherwise, we were already using the vocabulary and telling him that God loves him. He was already familiar with the language.	
Mary Helene (female)		three		
Tristan (male)		four		Mom attended three and grandma attended threee. Mom attended one.
Jackson (male)	24 mos.	four	We have a Fisher Price nativity set at home, like the one at church. He loves playing with it on our coffee table. He could consistently identify baby Jesus, mom and dad. When we saw nativity scenes, he would say “Baby Jesus.”	
Evan (female)	17 mos.	two		
Collin (male)		three		
Alexandra (female)	20 mos.	four		

Christopher (male)		three	
Reese (male)	17 mos.	five	Dad comments about environment: Our child will geet to spend 5 years (6 days a week for the majority of that time) in a great facility. He enjoys the windows near the floor. If there was a way to ask the children (age 0-2) I would not be surprised to find out that those windows were their favorite aspect of the new design.
Matthew (male)		two	
Skye (female)	23 mos.	four	Skye has been in the toddler class as opposed to the two-year old class and seems to like it better. I am not sure of any spiritual moments I have observed but am not sure how to identify a two-year old spiritual moment.
Ella (female)	22 mos.	five	I'm not sure exactly what she has gotten out of the class because she can't really communicate anything more than basic information right now.; However, I know that she likes to go to church. When I tell her it's the day to go to church she smiles, nods her head and says, "Church." She usually does not get upset when we leave her in the nursery. I know she enjoys being there. We try to talk to her about church and ask her if she learned about God, Jesus, Noah, etc. She usually just repeats what I say. It might have been helpful to know what was being taught each week so that we could have discussed it with her. One week, while driving to church, I told her she was going to learn about God. She said, "God." Then I said, "...and Jesus." She nodded her head and said, "Jesus....JoJo...Jesus." Then we had to explain to her that JoJo the Clown and Jesus were not the same. It was pretty funny. She has several books that tell Bible stories and one very abbreviated Bible for little kids. She does pay attention when we read the books. She knows who Moses is and that he led "people." She also loves to read the "Dear God, Good Night" book that we received from St. Luke's. I think it's because she knows that's the only book that I will read to her after I've said, "No more books. It's bed time." She asks for it by saying, "Dear God", then se sits in my lap and says
			Mom attended three; dad attended two.

			“pray.” She bows her head by tilting her head down, slightly to the side, so that she can still see the book. She clamps her hands together in front of her. That pose usually does not last long because it’s hard to have praying hands and turn the page at the same time. She has to turn the pages by herself. Mommy is not allowed to help and before going to bed when I say, “It’s time to pray.” She runs to get that book. She does not get the concept that we can pray before bed without it. I think she is learning. It is just hard for her to tell me about it because she does not have the words. I do believe this is helping to set a foundation for her future in the church, and I do think that children understand more than just playing, even if they can’t communicate it.	
Lily (female)	23 mos.	three		Mom attended three; dad attended two.

Name	age	Parent Observations	3 week parent class on toddlers spirituality
Kate (female)	3	Parents of young children (not toddlers) who attended spirituality of toddlers. Kate immediately loved the prayer box and for the first 3 weeks choose to do the prayer box instead of reading books before bed. Some days we did the prayer box 2 or 3 times! Since then it has lost some of it's novelty (which I think is a good thing) and has become something we often do before bed. We still give her the choice. What's interesting to me is that even on nights she chooses books instead of the box, she often chooses Bible stories. She took charge of setting up the space and the order of each thing we did. The lamb became very special and she slept with it each night. Our ritual... Each night Kate would get the box and set up the space. Turning on the light became her favorite thing. We added prayer beads to the box and created a mini library of Bible stories and church related books. She chose one to read each night as part of prayer time. At first, it was important for the Bible story book to fit inside the prayer box, but we thankfully got over that once we started the library. We start with the prayer beads and thanked God for one thing for each bead. This ranged from "thank you, God, for my Princess Dora Fairytale Castle" to "thank you, God, for everyone in the whole wide world." After a week or so, she began to save the last bead for me to pray. One night I prayed for my Mother's safety as she traveled to Oklahoma the next night. Matt did prayer time with Kate the following night, and she remembered that prayer and also prayed for Mimi's safe travels on the "big airplane." The blessing stick is a favorite. It is always saved for last. She is now in charge of the blessings and does a blessing on my hand first. She likes to do a "BIG cross" over my entire hand. I guess she's thinking the bigger the better! She quickly picked up on the wording... sometimes it is out of order, but she always ends with "God is always with Mommy." I then give her a blessing and of course she wants a "BIG cross" on her hand.	Mom attended three.

		There have been a few nights when we have had guests. Little brother Andrew is often a guest at prayer time and Kate gives him his blessing. When we have friends over they are also invited to prayer time with the whole family. Here's a story you may find interesting . . . daddy picked Kate up over his head and here's how the conversation went . . . me to Heaven and I saw God." Daddy: Did God talk to you? Kate: Yes Daddy: Did God tell you that he loves you? Kate: Yes. He said he loves me the mostest! I think she's getting the message that God loves Kate! Mother comments on environment: the rooms were less than inviting when we first came to the nursery. They were bland and cluttered. The new space is very inviting and well kept. The storage space in the rooms allows less of a daycare look. When I gave tours to new families, I was a bit embarrassed as to how cluttered the spaces were. I am now very proud to show off our facility!	
Maya (Female)	2	Maya now takes a moment to say a prayer before eating. That is something we have not done traditionally as a family.	Mom attended three.
SS Class	2's	In Sunday School, the kids understand that the lamb is symbolic and normal in their lives. Just as they like to play with a fire truck and understand the basic purpose of the fire truck in our lives, the kids understand that the basic purpose of the lamb is for comfort, love, and sharing. I think that is a great concept to start their relationship and understanding with God.	Same mom as above.

APPENDIX G - SPIRITUALITY OF TODDLERS ADULT CLASS

SPACE AT HOME, DAY CARE, AND CHURCH

A cluttered space may say it is okay to leave things anywhere you wish.

Bright colors may invite lots of activity while cool and soft colors invite a sense of calm.

A flexible lighting plan helps to set the mood. A steady diet of too bright or too dim of light may cause an uncomfortable feeling and cause one to fidget or have headaches.

Another cause for discomfort is the temperature of the room. Is it too cool or too warm?

What about acoustics in the room? Does the sound bounce around from wall to wall? Kids will too!

If the area is to encourage a quiet space, does it appear soft and comfortable to allow children to calm themselves and listen to God?

If the area is for movement, is it clear of furnishings and covered with a floor surface that is safe for children?

If children are in the same space week after week, does the furniture stay the same or is it rearranged periodically?

How about the placement of pictures? Are pictures placed at eye-level? Whose eye-level? Try getting on your knees at the height of the children and see what you discover.

Does the room look as if someone is caring for the space or as if no one pays attention to how it looks? Is the same picture there one month or six months?

Taken from: Clare Cherry. *Please Don't Sit on the Kids* (Belmont, California: David S. Lake Publishers, 1983), 25-26.

SPIRITUALITY OF TODDLERS CLASS

TODDLER DEVELOPMENT

Kris Haig, *Hungry Hearts*, Spring 2004, Volume XIII, Number 1, *A Developmental Perspective on Spiritual Practices*, (:Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church), 9.

Kris Haig, a Presbyterian minister and spiritual director noted these developmental characteristics:

STAGE	Infancy and Toddler
AGE	Birth to 18 months
SOCIALLY IMPORTANT PEOPLE	Mother or primary caregiver
DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS	Trust; belonging; learning by doing
SPIRITUAL PRACTICES and MESSAGES	“God cherishes me.” Receiving love through being held, sung to, read to, and prayed over.
STAGE	Early Childhood
AGE	18 months to 3 years
SOCIALLY IMPORTANT PEOPLE	Parents
DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS	Autonomy; self-control
SPIRITUAL PRACTICES and MESSAGES	“God is everywhere. I can use all my senses to explore and learn about God.” Exercises in awareness and noticing; “lectio” on objects; active prayer such as body prayer and prayer walks; simple rituals; talking to God honestly.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS BIRTH TO EIGHTEEN MONTHS

Information taken from Kris Haig, Karen Yust, Karen DeBord with additions by the author

Relationships:

Mother or primary caregiver is the important person in their life.

Developmental:

Infants cry not out of selfishness but to speak of a profound need for another: the one who will provide food, touch, and the soothing presence of human attention; they need others to survive.

Infants and toddlers trust that they are cared for and safe; they are capable of learning who they belong to;

Infants and toddlers learn to do things by trying to do it.

Erik Erickson, psychologist suggested birth-twelve months was Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust depends which on the nurturing relationship of the caregiver. This trust is foundational for growing in faith.

Discovers their verbal self at about fifteen months.

Some authors suggest between ten-eighteen months is when our emotions develop which are closely connected to long-term memory.

"When you treat a person as she appears to be, you make her worse than she is. But if you treat a person as if she already were what she potentially could be, you make her what she should be." - Goethe

Spiritual practices and messages:

Trust is transferable to God. God loves me. Child receives love through the sparkle in caregivers eyes as they are held, sung to, read to and prayed over. They learn through songs of faith, repetition of stories of faith, and identification of stories. Child begins to identify as a child of God if child receives such messages and practices. Repeat the message that God loves them and so do I.

Environment affects brain development:

The caregiver's body temperature, the sounds in the room, the pictures on walls & ceilings, mobiles above cribs, or nothing in a room ... all impacts the brain development.

Spiritual brain development:

Receiving touch through prayers and blessings gives life, love and comfort.

What do toys say about spiritual play? When a child's environment includes symbols of the nativity, the child wonders at the story throughout each level of development. When a child experiences ritual, it offers comfort and stability through the repetition.

TODDLERS EIGHTEEN MONTHS TO THREE YEARS

Information taken from Kris Haig, Karen Yust, Karen DeBord with additions by the author

“By the time a child is three years old, they have received half of their character development.”

Relationships:

Parents and caregiver are important.

Developmental:

Autonomy; self-control.

Kolberg’s stages of moral development notes that before age four or five, children do not engage in this cognitive practice. They are not capable of understanding any perspective but their own and everyone around them is to focus on them.

Spiritual practices/messages:

God is everywhere. I can use all my senses to explore and learn about God. Exercises in awareness and noticing; “lectio” on objects; active prayer such as body prayer, prayer walks; simple rituals, talking to God honestly.

What do toys say about spiritual play?

When a child’s environment includes symbols of the nativity, the child wonders at the story throughout each level of development. When a child experiences ritual, it offers comfort and stability through the repetition. A safe place to share the happy and sad moments in life.

Environment affects brain development:

What does the space communicate to you? What is the first thing you see? Is it clutter? Is it welcoming?

Spiritual brain development:

Ritual, symbols, holy listening, all engage the brain to develop synapses in spirituality. Repetition reinforces.

APPENDIX H - EDUCATIONAL THEORIES WITH TODDLERS

MI FOR A TODDLER'S ADVENT UNIT

1. Music Smart – This may be the first intelligence or the primary intelligence for toddlers. Songs often have repeated words that reinforce the learning. Dancing, walking, and movement brought children into learning the story. Sung prayers, and music that soothes and calm gave the toddler ways to experience and express faith.
2. Body Smart – The child discovered how to move to music, practiced praying hands for prayer time, received a blessing on the hand, played with spiritual toys, and used small motor skills in craft activities. Finger plays and rhymes could be added.
3. Word Smart – Children listened and watched as the adults modeled songs, prayer and told stories. Children followed instructions to sit in a circle and at the table. Languages, including religious language, are formed.
4. Nature Smart – Children identified animals and their sounds, people and what they say.
5. Number Smart – Children counted the stars in the sky while they looked at the page with a night time sky for the day the lesson focused on God created the sun, moon and stars.
6. People Smart – children processed information non – verbally and verbally through movement, music, blessing and prayer.
7. Self Smart – When a child received validation and praise they gained confidence and strengthened their self-esteem.
8. Picture Smart – The author did not identify the spatial intelligence in the toddler.

DR. DON ROGERS THEORY FOR QUALITY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION VIEWED
THROUGH THE TODDLER CLASS PROJECT

ENCULTURATION – The Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements gave a process or ritual by which a toddler learned the stories of faith and valued those stories through the various elements described in this paper.

SOCIALIZATION – The relational component of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture incorporated the toddler into the classroom activities, spiritual play, the act of blessing, and the building of trust. Children worked together, in relationship, in creating a community picture. Children wanted to worship, as a community, with everyone in their home.

FORMATION – The adults helped in the shaping of a toddler's faith through the planned activities of a blessing based spiritual nurturing church nursery. Children formed their own faith through spiritual play with toys and with others. Adult faith, when using elements of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, opened their hearts and minds to shaping from a toddler!

INSTRUCTION – The priority of an intentional plan of action, for the toddler class, offered parents assurance regarding attention to their child's safety, comfort and spirituality.

APPENDIX I - SPIRITUALITY OF TODDLERS CLASS SURVEYS

PARENT (CARE GIVER) - CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY SURVEY #1

In a narrative or brief story, tell how you have experienced, with your child, children or other children, each of the following:

Prayer:

Ritual:

Blessing:

Relationships:

Bible stories:

Religious language:

SPIRITUALITY OF TODDLERS CLASS

PARENT (CAREGIVER) SURVEY # 2

How did you learn what it meant to be part of the family?

How did you learn what it meant to support and to be supported by the family?

PARENT (CARE GIVER) - CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY SURVEY #3
(not used)

Describe what you notice about your child's spirituality:

Name some ways a child's gifts could be affirmed:

PARENT (CARE GIVER) - CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY SURVEY #4
(Not used)

What is your child's experience of hospitality at church?

APPENDIX J – BAPTISMAL RESPONSE

Congregational Responses from the 1992 *Book of Worship*

“The Baptismal Covenant II” invited the pastor to address the congregation as follows:

“Do you, as Christ’s body, the Church, reaffirm both your rejection of sin and your commitment to Christ?” The congregation responds, “We do.” The pastor says, “Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include *these persons* now before you in your care?” The response is “With God’s help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround *these persons* with a community of love and forgiveness, that *they* may grow in *their* service to others. We will pray for *them*, that *they* may be *true disciples* who *walk* in the way that leads to life.”

“The Baptismal Covenant II-B” stated the following two options:

The pastor says, “Do you as a congregation accept the responsibility of *assisting these parents (and sponsors)* in fulfillment of the baptismal vows, and do you undertake to provide facilities and opportunities for Christian nurture and fellowship?” Congregation responds saying, “We will, by the grace of God.”

Or

“Members of the household of faith, I commend to your love and care *these children (persons)*, whom we this day recognize as *members* of the family of God. Will you endeavor so to live that *these children (persons)* may grow in the knowledge and love of God, through our Savior Jesus Christ?” The congregation says, “With God’s help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ that *these children (persons)*, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.”

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